

THE HERIOTS

SIR HENRY CUNNINGHAM



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THE HERIOTS



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BY

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CHAPTER XVI

A MINISTERING ANGEL

‘Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under it.’

MRS. VALENTINE HERIOT had soon to test by practical experience the disagreeableness of nursing and the painful self-sacrifice which attendance on the old and infirm involves. Lady Heriot became rapidly worse. A crisis was impending. It became clear to Mrs. Heriot that if a certain project which she had at heart was ever to be achieved it must be now. The hour for action had arrived: it had arrived, and might soon be gone, for Lady Heriot was sinking fast. Day by day her daughter-in-law could perceive the wan-

ing powers of mind and body. She had less strength, less grasp of thought, less capacity for business ; she was becoming more the victim of her infirmities ; her judgment was clouded ; her temper uncertain ; her will, now eagerly self-assertive, now fitfully indifferent or submissive. She was exactly in the condition upon which those who surrounded her might work with most effect ; but the hour was at hand when it would be impossible to work at all. A practical instinct taught Isabella Heriot the wisdom of making hay while the sun shines. It was shining now, but for how long ?

Fortune favoured Mrs. Heriot's resolution to make the best of her opportunities, for she was practically mistress of the situation. Sir Adrian, much wounded by his mother's behaviour to him in his money troubles, had been further aggrieved by her declining his invitation to pay her accustomed summer visit to Huntsham. He was little likely to

present himself in Seymour Street. Mrs. Hazelden, who had two sick children on her hands, had taken them to the seaside, and was too fully occupied with nursing to be able to get away to attend on her mother. Jack was exiled from Seymour Street. So the field was clear.

It had always hitherto been Lady Heriot's custom to invite Sir Adrian and Lady Eugenia to visit her during the London season. This visit was a great event to them: it enabled them to be with their mother, to have a taste of London life, to see their friends, and to enliven the monotony of Huntsham existence by a glimpse of society. This year Lady Heriot had not felt well enough to have guests in the house, even such privileged guests as her son and his wife. The doctor was strongly against any sort of worry or excitement. Lady Heriot had easily yielded to Isabella's offer to write on her behalf to Lady Eugenia and explain the necessity of

foregoing their usual visit. It is difficult to convey such an explanation graciously, and Mrs. Valentine, whom Lady Heriot was learning to employ more and more as her secretary, contrived to impart to her letter a decided flavour of ungraciousness. Sir Adrian had felt hurt, and the pain was none the less acute for the circumstance that self-respect enjoined that it should be endured in silence. The grievance was enhanced by Lady Heriot's behaviour to Jack. He had come to London, fired with the project of studying as a painter. He would naturally have gone to his grandmother's as to his home, and at first he had done so. But his reception had not been cordial. Lady Heriot was prejudiced against him. She disliked all that she had heard of his views, his erratic behaviour, his violent language, his readiness for disputation. She was greatly displeased with his father, and did not care to conceal her displeasure. Jack could not endure the

least hint of disparagement of his father, had blazed out in his defence, and had gone away at last in a huff. The next time that he called, his grandmother was out ; the next, she was lying down and too tired to see him ; the next, his aunt Isabella appeared on the scene and gave him a snubbing. Then Jack's visits to his grandmother had ceased altogether.

The field was clear ; Valentine and his wife were the only members of the family who were to be found in Seymour Street. The moment for action had arrived. Mrs. Valentine was not the woman to flinch. She had screwed her courage to the sticking place. She was now sacrificing her own tastes heroically in the furtherance of her designs. The Season was at its height ; she had a hundred engagements which she would fain have kept, but she gave up everything to devote herself to her mother-in-law. Valentine, too, made a point of coming every

afternoon on his way home from business, and spending some time beside his mother's sofa. Both were kind, assiduous, suggestive, somewhat domineering. But Lady Heriot felt no temptation to resist their domination. Her old pleasure in independence was gone. She was feeble. Everything tired her. The grasshopper had become a burthen. Her business troubles, when she tried to think about them by herself, seemed serious, overpowering. It was a comfort to have Valentine coming in, day after day, cool, cheerful, collected, seeing the way clearly through the thickest tangles, making light of matters which had seemed to his mother very grave indeed. It was a relief when Isabella arrived opportunely to write notes, make her arrangements, decide for her small matters, the decision of which was perplexing her. Lady Heriot had been a great correspondent, and was loth to abandon the habit; but the pile of unanswered letters—pleasure or business

—grew apace, despite all the efforts to reduce it.

Mrs. Valentine had found her one day sitting in a helpless way with a small mountain of envelopes before her. ‘Dear mother,’ she said, ‘you are quite unfit to write letters to-day. Do not try; tell me what you wish said and I will do it, or, better still, do not trouble about your letters to-day at all, and let me read to you a story. You will feel stronger to-morrow.’

Lady Heriot would have greatly resented such a proposal in her stronger days. Even now she did not surrender without a struggle. ‘Thank you, Isabella,’ she had said; ‘if you will write one or two notes at my dictation I shall do well enough. The letters can wait. The days that I am pretty well they amuse me.’

Those days, however, came seldomer and seldomer. It was in vain that Lady Heriot postponed the moment when her letter-

writing must be done through another. Her growing infirmity refused to be ignored. Her daughter-in-law was always at hand. Her aid, proffered with much dutiful affection, soon became a necessity.

One morning Mrs. Heriot happened to be at her mother's when Mr. Battiscombe paid his customary visit. She met him on the stairs, invited him to the library, and confided to him her view of the worry which Lady Heriot's letters were becoming to her. Mr. Battiscombe was greatly impressed by this virtuous daughter's good sense and devotion. 'We must stop that, of course,' he said; 'I must warn her against it; but you can manage it best. Keep troublesome letters out of her way. Answer the others for her. Whatever happens, do not let her be worried. Quiet is indispensable.'

The doctor's instructions found their way to the servants. It became the rule of the house that all letters for Lady Heriot should

lie on the hall-table till Mrs. Valentine arrived. She then took possession of those which wore the air of business; answered some, kept others, which seemed of importance, for her husband; threw away those which required no answer; took to her mother-in-law a small residuum, which she read to her, and answered for her.

‘Isabella is the greatest comfort to me,’ Lady Heriot told Valentine. ‘I was finding my letters a grievous burthen: now I quite enjoy them.’

Nothing could be more obvious than that each fresh occasion of excitement produced worse results on Lady Heriot’s health; and, accordingly, that the necessity of preventing such occasions was becoming more urgent. On no account whatever, Mr. Battiscombe told the nurse, must anything calculated to harass or agitate the invalid be allowed to come near her. Anything like a shock might produce the most serious consequences.

The great thing was to keep her mind at ease. Thus it came about that no letter found its way to Lady Heriot except through her daughter-in-law's hands; nor any but such as she deemed it expedient for her mother to know about. From this state of things it followed, as a natural and easy consequence, that Mrs. Valentine should feel justified in suppressing some inconvenient facts, misrepresenting others, and generally departing from the strict confines of truth whenever it became, for any reason, desirable to keep the invalid in the dark.

So Isabella Heriot became installed as nurse in chief. Her mother-in-law felt constantly less and less competent to resist, even to question her authority. Isabella was mistress of the house. She managed all business efficiently, energetically, adroitly. The servants learnt that she was a person whom it was well to conciliate. A maid, who had shown a disposition to question her

authority, found herself, to her extreme astonishment and disgust, suddenly dismissed. But to those who propitiated her by ready subservience, Mrs. Valentine was amiability itself. The influence of this agreeable despotism permeated the household. Mrs. Valentine's supremacy in the sick-room was presently reinforced by a nurse, who arrived from the hospital, was engaged by her, received instructions from her, and felt no inclination to dispute them. Mr. Battiscombe, when he paid his daily visits, was not displeased to find an agreeable lady ready to relieve the monotony of his professional labours. His little chat with Mrs. Heriot was an agreeable break. Isabella, dressed with becoming simplicity—bright, active, solicitous—was ever at her post, the type of feminine sympathy, energy, resource. Her ascendancy was complete.

An unconscious but powerful ally presented himself in the person of her little boy.

Antinous was at a charming stage, and, as every one admitted, a most dear little fellow. His visits to his grandmother were the great amusement of her day. However ill, however suffering she might be, she never forgot this, or would consent to forego it. The child liked his visit to his grandmother's, where every one conspired to spoil him. He was encouraged to like it. Day by day he came—the pink of juvenile courtesy—and prattled to the old lady in artless affectionate accents. Antinous was a well-conducted young gentleman, and had learnt by early initiation the supreme importance of behaving properly. His grandmother thought him a little angel; and could not have got through the afternoon without a visit from this small consoler; and the small consoler never failed. One of his unconscious functions was to show his mother at her best. With him and about him Mrs. Valentine was perfectly sincere. Her icy side, her worldliness, hardness,

frivolity, melted before a genial glow of maternal affection. Here, for once, she was tender, anxious, romantic, all that a mother should be. Lady Heriot liked many things about her daughter-in-law, but nothing in her pleased her so well as her devotion to her child. Devotion, however, is tempted to be unscrupulous. Mrs. Valentine's devotion took the form of a passionate anxiety to secure for little Antinous the prize which was so nearly within her grasp, which might so easily escape it. There could be no delay, for Isabella had become aware that her mother-in-law was very near her end, and that the hours during which she would be able to act with any show of independence were numbered.

CHAPTER XVII

‘THIS DEED IS YET TO DO’

‘But screw your courage to the sticking place,
And we’ll not fail!’

‘I WOULD,’ writes an agreeable moralist, ‘have a woman true as death. At the first real lie, which works from the heart outwards, she should be gently chloroformed into a better world, where she could have an angel for a governess, and feed on strange fruits, which will make her all over again, even to her bones and marrow.’

It would be as profitless as impolite to conjecture how large a gap might be occasioned among many ornaments of modern society if ever any such stringent scheme of moral

rehabilitation became more than a play of fancy. Mrs. Heriot, it must be feared, had long ago told *her* first lie. She was already committed to a bold investment in mendacity ; yet she had done little more than prepare the ground for the achievement which she had at heart. Lady Heriot's will was as yet, so far as any one knew, unaltered. She must be made to alter it. In a few weeks—a few days—the precious wealth—so long the object of desire, of hope, of contrivance—might be irretrievably lost,—gone to pay Sir Adrian's bills, to float his silly schemes, to satisfy creditors who little deserved satisfaction, to enable Jack to amuse himself with philanthropic fads and socialist experiments. Little Antinous would have missed his chance ; and through whose default ? Would such a chance recur ? Do such chances, once neglected, present themselves again ?

Why hesitate ? The odds were, Isabella Heriot told herself, greatly in her favour.

On the one hand, old age, infirmity, the lessening power, the clouded intellect, the wavering will. On the other, youth, strength, health, resolution, the firm hand, the iron nerve. What but the rankest cowardice could doubt of the result, or shrink now, at the supreme moment of consummation, from the means by which the result must be achieved? Was she, Isabella Heriot asked herself, or was she not, made of the stuff by which courageous deeds are done?

The position was critical. That afternoon, as she was driving away from Seymour Street, she met Sir Adrian, almost at his mother's door. He had hurried up to London at the news of Jack's escapade, had been to see him, heard his version of the story, and had come at once to explain the circumstances, and, so far as might be, to extenuate them to his mother. 'How is mother, Isabella?' Sir Adrian said; 'I want particularly to see her.'

'Do you?' said Isabella. 'I would not, if I were you, to-day.'

'No?' asked the other; 'is she ill then?'

'She is not well to-day,' said Mrs. Heriot, 'and she is angry, very angry. You will make her worse if you go to her. She is much displeased with Jack, and has forbidden him the house.'

'Forbidden him the house!' cried Sir Adrian, turning very red. 'Surely not that!'

'Can you be surprised?' continued Isabella. 'Why need he add to our disgraces? We have had enough this year, in all conscience, already, without courting notoriety among the pickpockets and ragamuffins at Bow Street.'

'Forbidden him the house!' repeated Sir Adrian, by this time thoroughly angry; 'then she has forbidden his father. I certainly will not go in. Tell mother, when she cools, that poor Jack is not so black a sheep as she supposes. He was really not

to blame at all, except the small blame of going to see a crowd. I will tell you how it happened.'

Then Sir Adrian described the occurrence from his own point of view, from which Jack's escapade seemed, at worst, a piece of generous indiscretion. 'Forbid him the house, indeed! You must tell mother the truth about it, Isabella. I trust you to do so.'

'I will tell her, Adrian,' said Mrs. Heriot. 'I will do my best for you. Leave it to me. By the way, shall I drop you at the Station? I am just going for a drive, and have nowhere particular to go to, and we can have a chat.'

So Sir Adrian was driven safely off the field. On the way to the Station Mrs. Valentine talked kindly and affectionately to him, sympathised warmly in the Hunts-ham troubles, and sent many tender messages to her sister-in-law. 'I will keep

you informed as to how mother is, and what is her mood toward you and Jack. Your coming to her just now would only do harm in every way ; only wait patiently, and I have good hopes. I will do my best.'

Sir Adrian took his departure, sad, angry, humiliated. He loved his mother heartily, and now he was estranged from her. She was acting harshly, cruelly, not as a mother should. It was revolting to think that Isabella stood between them, and that he was actually dependent on her mediatory services to effect a reconciliation. Anyhow, he would stand by Jack, cost him what it might !

Two days later Lady Heriot made an unexpected rally. She seemed in better force than for weeks past. She had shaken off the lethargy which had been benumbing her ; her mind had recovered its tone, its clearness ; she was feeling strong and well.

The doctor, when he came, as usual, in

the morning, was surprised and pleased at his patient's improvement; he observed to the nurses on her fresh access of vigour, her brightness, her clearness of mind, her good spirits.

When, a little later, Mrs. Valentine came, she found her mother-in-law walking with a nurse's aid about her drawing-room. There was a strange glow of colour in her cheeks. Her eyes could still flash—keen and eager—from beneath a gray beetling brow. They flashed now, when Lady Heriot began to talk on the theme of Adrian's unkindness, disloyalty. No letters had come from him of late. The old lady stood, confronting Mrs. Valentine, with her shrivelled, trembling hand resting on her stick, and poured out her grievances.

‘They neglect me, Isabella,’ she cried. ‘*He* neglects me. I should not mind about Eugenia. She was always cold; but my boy—Adrian—my boy, whom I loved so well,

and have done so much for! and who loved me once with all his heart! It is bitter, bitter, I can assure you; bitterly cruel.'

The tears stood in Lady Heriot's eyes; her voice shook with emotion; she was evidently greatly overwrought.

'Come and sit down, dear mother,' Mrs. Valentine said, 'and pray do not excite yourself; take my arm and let me help you to the sofa.'

Lady Heriot, clinging hard to Isabella, got back to her couch, and sank back upon the pillows. 'I could have forgiven everything but unkindness,' she continued; 'unkindness and ingratitude, want of common affection, common respect. If Adrian expects me to forgive that, he is mistaken. I cannot. I will not. I have resolved to alter my will, —long resolved. I ought to have done it before. I will do it now. I shall send for Mr. Graves to-morrow.'

'It is well to do such things at once,' said

Mrs. Valentine, 'if they have to be done. Can I help you?'

'Yes,' said her mother; 'go and get the papers, will you, Isabella? I want to look at them again,—the will and the codicil. They are together in the strong box in my room. The keys are on that little table, in my bag.'

Isabella went, with a beating heart, on her mission. It was a supreme moment. She was now to see the will—the fateful will, which no member of the family had ever been allowed to see. She was to see it, to handle it, discuss it. She held the keys; once held, they would not be easily resigned.

Isabella's conscience had smitten her as she heard Lady Heriot's piteous complaints at Adrian's ingratitude, and saw what her deceit was costing. But conscience now! scruples now! There were other things to think of!

Mrs. Valentine came back presently with

the papers, and found her mother-in-law impatient for her return, and in a communicative mood.

She took the papers eagerly. She held the codicil in her hand. 'It all depends on this, Isabella. The will sacrifices you all to Adrian—all of you, Valentine, Antinous, are sacrificed!'

'Ah!' cried Isabella, the exclamation breaking from her in her intense anxiety.

'Yet I love them; they have loved me. Valentine has been a good son, and you have been a good daughter. I love you—you and your darling Antinous. But I was bound to do everything for Adrian. It was his father's wish; for years it has been mine; you were all to be sacrificed for Adrian, to keep him afloat. But now, what is the use? The estate is gone, or soon will go. The entail is destroyed. Depend upon it, the sheriff's people will soon be at Huntsham again. Jack is disgraced; more money will

only help him to disgrace himself further. I shall not allow it.'

'If you choose Valentine to have the money,' said Isabella with emphasis, 'he would, I am confident, be guided by your wishes about it. What is it that you wish?'

'My wish,' said Lady Heriot, 'is to save Adrian from the consequences of his folly, and Jack from the consequences of his ; to save our family from disgrace, disaster ; to save Huntsham, if it be possible. I do not know what to do, what my dear husband would have wished. I am unfit for business, quite unfit. I am weak, very weak. I cannot think for two minutes together. I ought to have done all this long ago, while I was hale and strong. It was very wrong of me to postpone it—weak, irresolute, idle. I have been much to blame ; but it was difficult, and I delayed.'

'Why delay any longer?' said Mrs. Valentine, who felt that the final moment

for action had arrived. 'You are well to-day; you know your own mind; you know what you wish; Valentine will obey your wishes. Why not act at once?'

'I have had this codicil prepared,' said Lady Heriot. 'It revokes the residuary gift to Adrian, and virtually makes Valentine my heir. It is all ready for execution. It merely needs my signature. I have shrunk from signing it; I still shrink. I have kept putting it off, but I will do so no longer. I will get you to write for Mr. Graves and sign it to-morrow.'

Isabella was well aware of Mr. Graves's predilections. The idea of his appearance on the scene at this critical conjuncture filled her with apprehension. Delay was dangerous.

'Is it necessary to have Mr. Graves?' she said; 'it is only an additional fatigue for you. And why wait till to-morrow? You say that you have already delayed too long!'

Mrs. Valentine spoke with a decisiveness which her mother-in-law had by this time learned to dread. Non-compliance meant a struggle, and a struggle for which she was very much disinclined and very unfit. Isabella's present reasoning was hard to meet. Lady Heriot could only think of one excuse for procrastination.

‘We must have two witnesses. There is no one but the nurse and the servants. I do not care to have any of them mixed up in my concerns. It would not be proper.’

‘Surely,’ said Isabella, ‘there could not be a better witness than Sister Catharine. As for the other witness, Antinous is downstairs with Malcolm: she is discreet, trustworthy, and silent as the grave. I will send for her.’

‘I would rather wait till Mr. Graves can come, Isabella,’ Lady Heriot pleaded with a somewhat beseeching tone: ‘I cannot act without him. I am very tired. I have done

and talked too much already to-day. I don't feel well. I have the strangest feeling in my head. I can do nothing more.'

Mrs. Valentine showed no symptom of giving way.

'Come, mother,' she said, 'get it done at once and off your mind. It is that which is worrying you. After all, it pledges you to nothing. You can revoke it when you please.'

Lady Heriot had sunk back on the sofa and closed her eyes. She took no notice of Isabella's last answer.

Mrs. Valentine rang the bell. A nurse came from the adjoining room. 'Will you,' she said, 'send down and tell Malcolm to bring Master Antinous to her ladyship?'

'Antinous,' muttered Lady Heriot faintly; 'dear little fellow. I have not seen him to-day. I want to see him; but he must not stay long. I am dreadfully tired.'

'You will be less tired, dear mother, when

you have done with the execution, and have got it off your mind. It is merely writing your name.'

'Be it so,' said the old woman helplessly ;
'but I would rather have waited.'

Lady Heriot lay dozing. Antinous and his nurse presently arrived. The child took his accustomed place by his grandmother's side. She looked at him, smiled, laid her hand tenderly on his head, and closed her eyes again ; she wished to sleep.

Meanwhile Mrs. Heriot showed Malcolm the document which she was called to sign. 'My lady wishes you to witness this codicil,' she said, 'because you can be trusted, and will not chatter. You will see her sign it, and remember that Nurse Catharine sees her as well, and then you both will sign it yourselves. Go now and tell Nurse Catharine, and bring her in.'

'Grandmother is asleep,' said Antinous, who, half frightened, had slipped away from

Lady Heriot's sofa to his mother's side ; ' she keeps falling asleep while I talk to her.'

' Mother,' said Isabella briskly, ' here is the codicil you want to sign. Malcolm and Nurse Catharine are going to witness it for you.'

Lady Heriot opened her eyes, gave a half-frightened look at her daughter, and tried to sit up. Isabella helped her, propped her with a pillow, and placed a blotting-book, with the codicil upon it, on her mother's lap, and put a pen in her hand.

' I am strangely feeble to-night,' Lady Heriot said ; ' I see everything indistinctly. Give me my glasses, Isabella. Where is it that I am to sign ? I can hardly hold the pen.'

' Here is the place, mother,' Mrs. Valentine said, more and more impressed with the necessity of immediate action ; ' but wait, please, till Malcolm and Nurse Catharine are here.'

Lady Heriot's hand trembled exceedingly, and it seemed doubtful at first whether she would be able to produce a legible signature. But she persevered, and her name was written. 'I sign this,' she said, 'as a codicil to my last will and testament. Now, Sister Catharine, be so good as to write your name underneath.' Isabella took the codicil, and arranged the pillows for her mother to lie down again. Lady Heriot sank back with a gesture of fatigue and closed her eyes. 'Thank you,' she said, 'now I will rest again.'

The two women went to the table and signed their names in the place indicated for them in the codicil. Nurse Catharine arranged Lady Heriot's sofa and went away into the next room.

'Malcolm,' said Mrs. Heriot, 'you can take Antinous down to the drawing-room and read to him. I will stay here awhile. My lady is dozing.'

Presently Mrs. Heriot rose and summoned Sister Catharine. 'Come and sit here, please nurse,' she said; 'I must go downstairs and send my little boy home.'

Her movements caught her mother's ear. 'Are you going, Isabella?' she asked faintly. 'When does Valentine return? I want to see him?'

'He is at Liverpool, mother, and he returns this evening; but he must not come to see you to-night. You have had a trying day and are tired. You will feel stronger to-morrow. Valentine and I will come to you directly after breakfast.'

'Isabella,' said Lady Heriot, 'I am not feeling well. I wish you could let Malcolm stay here to-night. I want a face I am used to. Would it inconvenience you?'

'Of course not,' said Mrs. Heriot; 'but, mother, I will stay myself.'

'No,' said Lady Heriot with sudden emphasis, 'I do not want that. It would fidget

me. You must be at your own home. But I should like to have Malcolm. Phillips is quite knocked up. She and Nurse Catharine have been hard worked of late. I wish them both to have a night in bed.'

'You shall have Malcolm, of course, mother,' said Mrs. Heriot. 'I shall be delighted to leave her. She will think it the greatest honour, and she is an excellent nurse. I will send her up to you.'

The sick woman had closed her eyes again and seemed to be dozing. Isabella bent over and kissed her brow. As she did it a pang of shame and remorse shot into her soul. The sleeper's face—sad, careworn, suffering—stamped itself on her brain's retina. She knew that she would never be able to forget it; already she was trying and in vain. It was printed indelibly. The deed was done,—the end which Isabella had so longed to accomplish, which she had compassed in so many workings of her active brain, so hoped

for, so contrived for : it was achieved, and, with the achievement, there entered into Isabella's soul the sharp pang of guilt, the consciousness of shame, of dishonour. She had always meant to do it ; yet, now that it was done, it filled her with horror. She was appalled, she knew not why. She put the fateful writing back into its place in the strong box and locked it fast. As she turned the key it seemed as though she were locking away all happiness in life. Innocent she could never be again. Uprightness, purity of soul, the sanctity of justice, rectitude of aim—she had long trifled with them, disregarded them ; now she had turned her back on them for ever. She had signed the satanic bond. Her part of the vile compact was yet to be fulfilled. Her soul was stained with guilt. Darkness was, even now, gathering thick upon her.

Mrs. Heriot put the key in her pocket and went firmly downstairs. ' Malcolm,' she said,

‘my lady would like you to sit up with her to-night. I know that you will like to do it. I will take Antinous home and manage for him. Come in the morning and tell me what sort of night my lady has had. I will tell them to send you what you need.’

‘Maggie can bring my things, ma’am, if you please,’ said Malcolm. ‘Perhaps she might be allowed to sleep here, too, and spend the evening with me. It is her last in England. They start to-morrow.’

Malcolm’s young sister, Maggie, was passing through London, *en route* for India. Her mistress was leaving home by that week’s mail. Malcolm, who was devoted to her, had been allowed to entertain her for a couple of nights. She was to join her mistress next day. The two sisters had been hoping for a last evening together. Mrs. Heriot acquiesced at once.

‘Certainly,’ she said; ‘I had forgotten about Maggie, but she can sleep here per-

fectly. Perhaps she will be of use. At all events, you will get some of the evening with her. I will tell Phillips to have a bed made ready for her.'

Malcolm was a hereditary vassal of the Goldinghams. Her father had been all his life in Mr. Goldingham's employ, her mother was in their service when she married. The two had lived for years in the village in one of Mr. Goldingham's show cottages. Malcolm had been born there, and had gone as a help in the nursery during Isabella's childhood. She had been devoted to her, she was now devoted to Antinous, with the firm passionate loyalty which an enthusiastic nature lavishes on the single object of its devotion. The fire of fanaticism smouldered in her sad nervous eye ; she loved the child now with a rapture which was almost fanatical. Some traits of a martyr's temperament might be read in her staid, self-contained, resolute manner, a composed aspect which bespoke a settled

purpose, an iron resolution, an unflinching courage. How this grim Scotch Calvinist found her way to Mrs. Heriot's household and held her own amidst its highly mundane and frivolous surroundings was a mystery to all parties concerned. There was, however, a mutual liking. Mrs. Heriot bore from Malcolm displays of self-will and outspokenness which she would have tolerated from no other servant. Malcolm, while she highly disapproved many things about her mistress, regarded her as, for some mysterious reason, exempted from the stern standard of duty by which she judged all other mortals. The child was greatly attached to her, and Mrs. Heriot, too busy and too fine a lady to be able to spare much thought or time for the cares of the nursery, was well content to leave him in the charge of one of whose care and fidelity she was so well assured.

CHAPTER XVIII

‘LAST SCENE OF ALL’

‘Vex not his ghost ! O let him pass ! He hates him,
That would upon the rack of this tough world
Stretch him out longer.’

VALENTINE learnt with some surprise that the codicil was actually signed. Some such disposition of her wealth had been, he knew, in his mother's thoughts for long. She had hinted at it more than once, but rather in the light of a possible alternative than of an immediately contemplated act. It was, Valentine felt, characteristic of his wife's effectiveness that she should have brought a vague idea to practical realisation. As to the means employed for this result Valentine felt that it would not be well to ask too much. Isabella

had, no doubt, influenced his mother—no doubt had not influenced her favourably to Adrian. As to Adrian and his doings Valentine was completely in the dark. The two brothers were upon the coldest terms. Sir Adrian had learnt of Jack's quarrel with his uncle, and had greatly resented it. As usual he was in a huff, and would write to none of his relations. Valentine knew only that his brother's usual letter to his mother had ceased to arrive, and that Sir Adrian himself had not been to see her. If Adrian chose to behave in this outrageous way while his mother was sinking every week to a lower stage of infirmity it was no business of Valentine's to interfere. He was startled, however, by his wife's announcement of Lady Heriot's altered will—startled, and not too well pleased. He had tried to silence his conscience; but its persistent reproofs—not to be silenced or ignored—were a source of discomfort. He had often abused Adrian's stupidity, often

sneered at his misfortunes ; but it was another matter to take his elder brother's portion, to grow rich at what was practically his brother's disherison. Put it in what light he would, Valentine could not feel comfortable about it. He received the news with a marked absence of any expression of pleasure. His feelings about the transaction were as little agreeable as his wife's, though he knew but a portion of its unpleasantness.

A sense of guilt was weighing on their spirits. Life seemed to have grown darker to both, overcast with a sudden unaccountable gloom. All was going well, more than well, Isabella again and again assured herself ; but, despite these efforts at self-encouragement, she experienced a sickening sense of ill. Such is the doom of the unhappy soul which quits the steep rugged path of right for ambrosial meads, which lie on either side, smiling gaily with poisonous flowers, with dust apples bright to the eye and bitter to the taste.

So Valentine and his wife went to bed with heavy hearts and agitated nerves. They passed a troubled night—uneasy slumbers, broken by bad dreams and sudden awakenings. A presentiment of coming trouble beset them even in sleep. When, at four o'clock, a cab came rattling into the silent street, and stopped below their windows, and then followed a loud ringing at the bell, both of them were wide awake; both knew that a crisis had arrived.

Their presentiment was correct. Valentine let the messenger in. He had come from Seymour Street with a note from Malcolm to say that Lady Heriot had had a fit, and was lying senseless. If they wished to see her again alive they must come without delay. Valentine ran upstairs to tell his wife. The two looked at each other with a guilty consciousness of what was in the other's mind.

Isabella was the first to speak. 'We

must go at once ; I shall be ready in a few minutes.'

In the meanwhile Mr. Battiscombe had arrived in Seymour Street, and was standing with Malcolm and Nurse Catharine at Lady Heriot's bedside. There was no symptom of returning consciousness. There was little to be done. The three stood in silence, watching the unconscious sleeper, already almost in her death-agony. There was an awful stillness. Outside the distant roar of London life had ceased. The world was sleeping ; only here there was no thought of sleep.

It was a relief when Mr. Battiscombe broke silence. 'When did she speak last ?' he asked, turning to Malcolm.

'About two,' she said ; 'her ladyship asked me what time it was.'

Malcolm's voice caused the doctor to turn and look at her. She was trembling violently ; her voice shook. Her appearance

bespoke some violent shock. Her face was haggard and bloodless : scarcely the dying form on the bed was more deadly pale ; her eye was wild with fright.

‘Come, come, my good woman,’ he said ; ‘you must keep calm. There is nothing to be agitated about. No one blames you. You have seen old people die before now, I suppose. The fit has been impending for days. The wonder is that it did not come before. It is well that it has come now to save her further suffering. What an easy end !’

Malcolm stood mute, motionless ; her heart was beating violently ; she heard its beats : she heard, too, the doctor’s words ; but they seemed dull and indistinct, meaningless to her. Answer him she could not. The doctor watched her with surprise.

‘You have got no nerve,’ he said, with some contempt in his tone, ‘or something has upset you. You can do no good here. You

had better go and lie down. I shall not want you at present.' 'People's temperaments are queer things,' he said to Nurse Catharine as Malcolm left the room; 'they belie physiognomies. That woman looks as if she were made of steel and oak—passivity itself; yet she is utterly unnerved at the sight of an old lady in a fit. She is almost fainting. Go and give her some brandy-and-water, and make her lie down awhile.'

Presently Valentine and his wife arrived. They found the doctor sitting at Lady Heriot's bedside. She lay perfectly unconscious. In all probability, the doctor said, she would never recover consciousness. She was dying fast. Any recovery, beyond a temporary arrest of the process of death, was out of the question. The housekeeper had, at his suggestion, telegraphed to Sir Adrian, as there was no time to lose. He hoped that this was right?

'Quite right, of course,' said Valentine;

‘I am much obliged to you. It is a question of hours, I suppose?’

‘A question of minutes,’ said the doctor. ‘Death cannot be far, and may be very near indeed; no one can say.’

Lady Heriot, however, was still alive when morning broke. Mrs. Valentine sat shuddering in the next room. She could not bear to watch the dying woman. She was greatly overcome. She had never had anything to do with such a scene before, and it appalled her. And well it might.

Death is dreadful enough when it approaches us, soothed by fond regrets, sweet recollections, and loving hopes; but death, when it forms a link in evil machinations—when it consummates a dishonourable contrivance—when it crowns an edifice of base design—how grim, how horrible it seems! Isabella felt a horror seize upon her soul. The Furies had begun to lash her. Had there been room for repentance she would

have liked to repent even now—to cancel the past, to wipe the tablets of her life clean from the wretched story of meanness and deceit. But the hour of repentance had passed. The writing could never be effaced :

‘The moving finger writes, and having writ,
Moves on : not all your piety nor wit
Can lure it back to cancel half a line,
Nor all your tears wipe out a word of it.’

The past was irrevocable. Having gone so far, Isabella could not, dared not stop. The wicked deed, however passionately she might long to recall it, could never be undone. However heavy the burthen, she must carry it now to her journey’s end. She had put the cup to her lips ; however bitter, she must drink it to the dregs. As she sat by herself and watched the day breaking—the day which would be so much to her, so eventful—which would confront her with those whom she had injured and defrauded—Isabella felt, in her despairing soul—as so many a wrong-doer

has felt before—that one horrid feature of guilt is the tyranny of its sway ; another, that, however a man may drill himself to look at it, it assumes at times so vile, so detestable an aspect, that he wonders how he came to do it.

Meanwhile the practical necessities of the moment had to be met. Sir Adrian had arrived and Lady Eugenia. Sir Adrian had found Mr. Battiscombe in the dining-room, and had learnt enough to tell him that he had been kept completely in the dark. For weeks past, Mr. Battiscombe told him, Lady Heriot's vitality had been running down at a rate which showed that the end could not be long delayed. For the last fortnight she had been actually dying. Last night's attack was merely the crisis which for days had been inevitable.

‘Why,’ asked Sir Adrian, ‘was I not informed of her condition?’

‘I thought that you had been,’ said the

doctor. 'I repeatedly warned Mrs. Heriot that those of her relatives who were concerned should be informed that her condition was critical, her end near; she must surely have written!'

Sir Adrian walked silently upstairs, entered his mother's room, and found the dying woman unconscious, motionless, almost inanimate; an occasional slight breath alone showed that life was not extinct. Her hand lay passive by her side, where the nurse had placed it. Her face, no longer lit up by expression, looked frightfully emaciated, death-like. Sir Adrian knelt by the bedside, bent over that white, withered hand—how familiar, how dear to him—and shed some bitter tears. The mother, whom he had loved so well—who had been so dear to him through a lifetime—the long years of trouble, anxiety, sorrow—sometimes mistaking him, sometimes unjust to him, sometimes displeased; but how tender, how dear, how

inexpressibly dear! And this was the end! She was passing away without one word of farewell, one sign of forgiveness, one assurance of uninterrupted love. Sir Adrian bent his head and wept in very bitterness of heart.

Jack presently came in with his mother, and took his father's hand silently. He stood, awestruck, at the foot of the bed. It was his first sight of death. His grandmother had been a great personage in his life—a main inspiring character in the personal drama which each of us plays out for himself—a ruling standard to which everything had to be referred, a critic whose criticisms might be dreaded. It was dreadful to see her stricken down into helplessness, unconsciousness, death. One chapter of Jack's life, he felt, was closing. The scene impressed itself with painful distinctness on the boy's mind. His father, pale, grave, indignant, haggard with the shock which that morning's news

had given him, with sorrow, with excitement, with wrath at the wrong-doers whose evil deeds were now revealed: his mother, weeping silently at the bedside; the nurses coming and going with noiseless flittings on their behests, or calmly waiting the last struggle; the silence broken only by an occasional undertone of talk; the guarded lights, whose faint rays grew pale as the bright morning came streaming through half-opened shutter and curtain; the little pomp and circumstance of the chamber where Death is soon to reign.

When, presently, Valentine and his wife came in, Sir Adrian turned upon them with a reproachful look, and failed to notice his brother's outstretched hand. Isabella turned ashy pale; she was coming before her judges, her foes. A new-born terror possessed her. It was in vain to pretend to herself that she was not afraid. She was in abject fear; of what, she scarcely knew; but she felt abject.

What might not occur in the way of discovery and disaster? One bad result of an evil deed, it has been well said, is the crop of evil wishes that springs up around it. Isabella felt one such evil wish acutely just now. She wanted her mother-in-law to die, and die quickly, without a word of love, forgiveness, benediction to her children. While she lived there was a possibility that reason might return sufficiently to allow of an explanation, reconciliation with Adrian, exposure and ruin to herself.

So stood the Heriots and watched in silence as their mother lay dying. It seemed as if the end had actually begun. Lady Heriot's breathing had become fitful, irregular, intermittent. The doctor had his hand on the dying woman's pulse. At last she gave a groan, opened her eyes, and looked around with fearful anxious expression. She glanced at Valentine and his wife and then turned to Adrian with a puzzled look, closed

her eyes, and sank back exhausted, seemingly unconscious.

'It is all over,' said Mrs. Valentine.

'No,' said the doctor ; 'the pulse is rallying. Death will not be yet.'

And so it proved. Lady Heriot presently opened her eyes again, this time with a look of intelligence, of recognition, as if she had been thinking out what she had seen before. She fixed her eyes on Adrian ; she moved her hand towards his. He took it and held it. Then she tried to raise the other ; her lips moved as though she essayed to speak. Adrian bent down to catch any uttered sound. But his mother was inarticulate ; was aware, apparently, of her powerlessness. She lay there holding Adrian's hand, her eyes fixed on him. Again she moved her hand and tried to speak, and this time intelligibly. All around her heard the words ; to some of them they were only too terribly distinct. 'All go but you, Adrian.'

She clutched him tighter than ever. Her emaciated, withered hand, with death's pallor already upon it, seemed to hold him with eager tenacity.

‘Go, go, I tell you.’

‘She is wandering,’ said Mrs. Heriot ; but no, there was nothing like wandering in Lady Heriot’s voice and gesture, which became momentarily clearer, more intelligible, and emphatic.

‘Turn them out, I tell you. Adrian, I bid you turn them out. You stay ; I want you.’

‘We had better go,’ said the doctor ; ‘she is perfectly conscious. It will agitate her if we do not obey her. Come.’

There was nothing for it but to obey. The doctor had opened the door and awaited their departure, ceremonious but decided. Valentine and his wife, Malcolm and the nurse, Lady Eugenia and Jack, went, with beating hearts, into the adjoining room.

'Shut the door, Adrian,' said the dying woman eagerly; 'bolt it.'

By the time Adrian had obeyed her, the feeble expiring flame was already burning low. But his mother could whisper still. 'My boy,' she said, 'kiss me!'

Adrian stooped and kissed her, that last sad kiss when each one knows that it will be the last.

'Why did you not come before, dear? I have been wanting you sadly. Is the door bolted? do not undo it; don't let them come in. Don't let *her* come near me. Don't go away. Adrian, are you there? Hold my hand tight.'

'I am holding it, mother,' Adrian said. 'I never heard till this morning of your illness. I came directly.'

'And why have you never written to me all these weeks?' asked his mother.

'Written! mother,' said Adrian. 'When

have I ever missed my Sunday letter to you these dozen years ?’

‘ Ah !’ groaned Lady Heriot, clasping her son’s hand with a sudden pressure. ‘ Kiss me, dear,’ she said. ‘ Forgive me, Adrian. God bless you, darling ; I have put it all right.’

Even as she spoke, Sir Adrian saw the light fade out of her eyes. She was shaken with a sudden spasm. Her grasp on Adrian’s hand relaxed. He ran to the door and summoned the doctor.

All might come in now, for Lady Heriot was dead.

CHAPTER XIX

THE FIRST DARK DAYS OF NOTHINGNESS

‘—— the vital spirits sink
To see the vacant chair and think
“How good, how kind ! and he is gone !”’

A NOTE from Malcolm, which reached Mr. Graves by the morning post, brought that gentleman in the course of the forenoon to Seymour Street. He was greatly shocked to learn of his old friend's death.

Mrs. Valentine took an early opportunity of handing to him the key of the strong box, which, she said, had been placed in her custody by Lady Heriot the previous day. At the same time she informed him of the execution of the codicil.

‘The codicil ?’ asked Mr. Graves sharply.

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Heriot; ‘I heard of it for the first time yesterday, when Lady Heriot bade me bring it from the strong box, executed it, and desired the nurse to attest her signature, which she did.’

Mr. Graves changed colour, and in vain endeavoured to modulate his voice so as to express no excitement. ‘And did any one else attest?’ he asked.

‘My little boy’s nurse, Malcolm,’ said Mrs. Valentine, ‘who happened to be here with him. You will find it in the strong box, where Lady Heriot told me to replace it.’

In the strong box, sure enough, it was, and justified Mr. Graves’s worst anticipations. He came downstairs after its perusal looking as haggard and perturbed as if he had seen a ghost. It was, as he viewed the case, a lamentable miscarriage—more lamentable than any which had befallen him in the whole of his career. He could not be

surprised, however, for he knew only too well how much this change in the disposition of her property had been in Lady Heriot's thoughts. The codicil had been prepared only a few weeks before, at her express direction, under his own superintendence. Its existence had occasioned him the profoundest anxiety, but he had been powerless in the matter. Lady Heriot had been peremptory about it. She was completely rational; no one had a legal right to interfere with the disposal of her property under her husband's will. She was an acute woman and experienced. She had the right to act as she pleased, and she had done so. Yet Mr. Graves felt that he had managed badly; the wrong result had come about. He was grieved, deeply grieved for Sir Adrian. He went at once to him in his room with the hateful document. 'Can I see you for a moment, Sir Adrian?' he asked.

'By all means,' said the other, pushing an

arm-chair round for his visitor ; ‘ but what is the matter, Graves, you look quite scared ? ’

‘ I have had a shock,’ said Mr. Graves ; ‘ it will be a shock to you, I fear, Sir Adrian. Mrs. Heriot has just told me that your mother executed a codicil to her will yesterday. It appears that she did so.’

‘ Well ? ’ said Sir Adrian, his heart beginning to thump, for Mr. Graves’s manner bespoke him the herald of some disastrous piece of news.

‘ I have it here,’ said Mr. Graves. ‘ Its effect is the worst that you can ever have feared. The residuary clause in your favour is revoked, and everything is given to Valentine.’

Sir Adrian sat stunned. ‘ It is impossible,’ he said ; ‘ there must be a mistake. My mother’s last words to me were to say that she had put everything right.’

‘ She cannot have known what she was saying,’ said Mr. Graves, ‘ for there can be

no doubt, I fear, about this codicil. Unhappily I know its contents only too well, for Lady Heriot ordered it to be drawn only a few weeks ago, and has had it by her ever since.'

'But what about my mother's words?' asked Sir Adrian.

'Irreconcilable, of course,' said Graves, 'and inexplicable, except on the assumption that her mind was wandering—too likely an assumption, I fear, as it was but a few moments before death.'

'But she was *not* wandering,' cried Sir Adrian. 'I am confident that she knew perfectly what she was about. She was as clear as I am now. There must be some fraud.'

'We must ascertain all about the execution, of course,' said the solicitor. 'It looks like a case of undue influence. We will examine the doctor and the servants, and see what grounds for that view

there are. Meanwhile say nothing to any one.'

Thereupon Mr. Graves had an interview with Mr. Battiscombe, and discussed the question of Lady Heriot's condition the day before her death. His account of her was little favourable to the theory of coercion or incompetence. He had seen her twice in the course of the day. She had been sinking for weeks, and was extremely weak ; but that morning she had rallied, and had been particularly well — vivacious, cheerful, and inclined to chat. She talked about various topics, and was in perfect possession of her faculties. In the evening she was tired and drowsy. He had not liked to rouse her into conversation ; but she answered his questions with complete intelligence. It would never have occurred to him that at any time during that day Lady Heriot could have been in a condition not to understand fully what she was about, or to be made to do what she did

not wish. There was nothing in the seizure of a nature to suggest previous obscuration of mind.

Then as to her last interview with Sir Adrian. 'What was her condition then?' Mr. Graves inquired.

As to this Mr. Battiscombe felt much more doubt. No one could say in such a case how far entire consciousness had returned. She died a few minutes later. In all probability entire consciousness would not return; not such consciousness as would allow of any importance being attached to what she said. It might well be, and this, on all the facts of the case, was the doctor's inference from her language and behaviour, that Lady Heriot was labouring under some delusion. Her wanting to turn them all out and have the door bolted looked like it.

It was obvious that no clue was to be found in this quarter. Mr. Graves next betook himself to the two witnesses. Nurse

Catharine's evidence entirely corroborated the doctor's as to Lady Heriot's condition throughout the previous day. It had been the best day she had passed for some weeks. She had done a little too much in the forenoon, and was tired and drowsy towards evening. Nurse Catharine had been in her room or the adjoining one all day. It had been settled that Mrs. Malcolm should sit up with her ladyship that night, and at one o'clock, accordingly, Nurse Catharine had gone to bed. During the previous hours she had been in attendance Lady Heriot was restless and uncomfortable, the result perhaps of the long sleep she had had after executing the codicil. As to her condition then, Nurse Catharine said that, so far as she could judge, no one could be more completely in the possession of her faculties than Lady Heriot had been throughout.

Malcolm, when questioned as to the execution, showed a return of her former nervous-

ness. Lady Heriot's death seemed to have given her a shock, the effects of which she could not shake off. She turned pale when summoned to Mr. Graves's presence, and was evidently in profound distress. She was, however, clear and decided in her answers. Lady Heriot, she said, had been unusually well that day—stronger and better than for some time past. She had seen her doctor in the forenoon, and was encouraged by feeling herself stronger. She saw him again in the evening. She had even walked about the drawing-room in the afternoon. She had seen her little grandson as usual. She was, Mrs. Malcolm would say, completely in command of her faculties throughout the day, perfectly mistress of herself and her actions, and fully aware of what she was about when she signed the codicil. Mrs. Valentine Heriot had been there as usual in the afternoon, but she and Nurse Catharine had been in and out of the room during the

whole visit, and had heard nothing but ordinary conversation; there was nothing like an argument or dispute. Mrs. Heriot had not, in her hearing, urged the execution.

‘And,’ inquired Mr. Graves, ‘Lady Heriot had a good night?’

‘No,’ said Malcolm; ‘she was restless. The doctor came at nine; she talked to him. After that I went to lie down. I sat up with her ladyship after one instead of the nurse. The seizure occurred at three, with no previous warning.’

‘Was Lady Heriot conscious during the night?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Malcolm; ‘I was in attendance on her ladyship frequently, and talked to her. She told me what medicines to give her, and bade me write a note to Mr. Graves, begging him to come without fail to her in the morning, which accordingly I did.’

‘Yes,’ said the solicitor; ‘and who posted it?’

‘I went and called my sister Maggie, who was sleeping in the adjoining room, and bade her go. After that my lady was more at ease and seemed to doze. I sat by the bedside watching her. At three o’clock she had the fit. I called out to Nurse Catharine. We rang for the servants, and sent off for Mr. Battiscombe.’

‘And your sister Maggie?’ asked Mr. Graves; ‘where is she?’

‘She went to the Docks this morning to join her mistress’s ship. They were to sail at nine.’

‘And nothing else occurred?’ asked the solicitor. ‘Try and think.’

‘Nothing,’ said Malcolm.

Then Mr. Graves examined the other servants. None of them knew anything of the night’s occurrences till they had been aroused by the intelligence of Lady Heriot’s seizure.

‘Was there no one else sleeping in the house?’

‘No one,’ Mrs. Phillips said, ‘except a young girl, Mrs. Malcolm’s sister, who was going to service, and who had been allowed to spend the evening with her and to sleep in Seymour Street. I was desired to have a room made ready for her. I put her in the room next to the nurse’s. She had to join her mistress at the Docks to sail for India. I sent her off at six this morning in a cab.’

Sir Adrian had sat in silent desperation as the examination proceeded and one witness after another corroborated the story of Lady Heriot’s competence. He felt a deep sense of injury. Whatever his mother might have thought at last, it was clear that within twelve hours of her death she had intended to disinherit him. She had prepared for doing so. She had intended it. He would not, if he could, dispute her intention.

‘It is perfectly clear,’ he said, in the broken tones of a man repressing intense emotion.

‘There is nothing to be done. I would not in any case contest my mother’s will.’

‘We have to be sure that it *was* her will,’ said Mr. Graves. ‘We have not as yet much ground for doubting it.’

‘We have none,’ said Sir Adrian. ‘We have examined every one.’

‘Every one but the girl,’ said Mr. Graves; ‘we must examine her.’

‘Would it be worth while?’ said Sir Adrian. ‘You will hardly catch her nearer than Bombay.’

‘We can have her examined by commission in India,’ persisted the lawyer, ‘and we must do so. You can never tell what you may come upon.’

‘What could we possibly come upon?’ said Sir Adrian pettishly. ‘No! it is perfectly useless. I have no money to throw away upon useless litigation. How could her evidence help us? Is it likely that it would?’

‘It is not likely,’ said Mr. Graves; ‘but it is the unlikely things that are always happening.’

‘I think it unnecessary,’ said Sir Adrian, ‘and undesirable. I do not care to dispute what my mother chose to do. Her wish is law.’

Two days later, when Mr. Graves came again to see Sir Adrian in Seymour Street, he found Mrs. Hazelden closeted with her brother. She still bore signs of the shock which the news of her mother’s death—the sight of her corpse—had given her. Sir Adrian had gone through a dreadful scene when, on her first arrival, he had to tell her that all was over. ‘Why was I never told about her illness?’ she had cried.

‘That is more than I can tell you, Lydia,’ Sir Adrian had said. ‘Why was not I? I heard of it only this morning myself, after the attack. Mother recovered only just

enough to know me, and to speak a couple of sentences.'

Then Sir Adrian had gone on to tell his sister how a codicil, giving the family money to Valentine, and executed the day before, had been found in the strong box along with the will.

'There is no doubt about it,' said Sir Adrian. 'There stands the codicil; the property is Valentine's.'

Mrs. Hazelden was thunderstruck. 'It is incredible,' she said. 'Mother never did it. Do not ask me to believe it. It is impossible. She could not; she would not, I am positive. I have talked it over with her a hundred times. She acted by father's express injunction. Her last words showed that she had acted as she always intended. Nothing could have changed her: nothing, that is, but——'

'But what?' said Sir Adrian.

'Nothing but force or fraud,' said Mrs.

Hazelden, 'or perhaps both—who knows? Isabella got into the house; kept us in the dark as to mother's illness; contrived to be the single one of us all who was near her for weeks before her death. That woman has lied, Adrian; she has intrigued; she has bred bad feeling between mother and you, and now we see the result. Nothing will ever induce me to believe that this wretched codicil was mother's act—her free conscious act—signed as it was, hugger-mugger, behind every one's back, and but a few hours before her death. Contest it, Adrian, to the last, I conjure you. You owe it to yourself, to Jack, to us all. Let nothing tempt you to give in. We will help you in the expense. Mother's behaviour on her deathbed; her desire to get Valentine and Isabella out of the room, and to keep them out; her last words to you, all point in the same direction. Isabella, of course, puts a bold face on the whole thing, but Malcolm's

behaviour bespeaks a guilty conscience. Her dejection, her prostration, her anxiety cannot be otherwise explained.'

Mr. Graves was a great friend of Mrs. Hazelden, and had a high opinion of her good sense. He respected her opinion. The case, he admitted, was suspicious. Still it was difficult to see from what quarter the invalidating evidence was to come. The attesting witnesses and the doctor's account of Lady Heriot's condition all went to show a complete understanding and an independent will. Some of the circumstances of the execution of the codicil were at first sight suspicious; but the more they were examined the less ground did there appear for impugning its validity. Lady Heriot's perfect competence was affirmed on all hands. It was not unnatural that she should wish to defer a painful act to as late a date as possible. It was what people constantly did. Mrs. Heriot's behaviour, though improper

and unkind, and susceptible of a painful construction, might be read in a different light. Lady Heriot, in the state in which she was, might easily have forgotten Sir Adrian's letters. If they had miscarried, how would it be possible to bring the miscarriage home to her daughter-in-law? If Adrian had been kept away from the house, it could be shown, in Mrs. Heriot's justification, that the doctor had peremptorily forbidden all exciting interviews. If, on the day when Sir Adrian had been in Seymour Street, he had been admitted to see his mother—excited as both of them were on the subject of Jack's misadventure—there would certainly have been a scene, a most painful scene, which was the very thing the doctor deprecated. Angry and suspicious as Sir Adrian was, as indeed Mr. Graves himself felt, it was difficult to find such tangible grounds as might be stated in Court and serve for impugning the validity of the transaction. Valentine had been

away from town and had known as little, apparently, of the whole affair of the execution as his brother.

So Sir Adrian, Mrs. Hazelden, and Mr. Graves sat long in confabulation, but separated at last without any satisfactory result.

‘It is a bad business,’ Mr. Graves said, as their conclave broke up; ‘painful, most painful in every way; but what can be done about it?’

‘I knew how it would be,’ said Sir Adrian bitterly, as Mr. Graves concluded. ‘I cannot contest the codicil. I see that clear enough. None the less, there has been foul play. I consider the whole transaction suspicious—suspicious and discreditable to all parties concerned.’

‘And so do I,’ said Mrs. Hazelden. ‘I would stake my existence that there has been some villainy somewhere, if only we can unearth it. Contest it, Adrian; contest it to the death.’

‘I see no way of contesting it,’ said Adrian in a despairing tone. ‘We should only be beaten. I am a ruined man. It is a comfort to be able to believe that mother did not intend to ruin me. Life has been full to me of hard things—and bitter things. This is the last and the bitterest.’

CHAPTER XX

CHRISTMAS AT HUNTSAM

‘That which we are, we are ;
One equal temper of heroic souls,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will,
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.’

LADY HERIOT'S death was a widely felt misfortune. It broke up a coterie. The uniting link of a little community was gone. The spell, which combined a number of contrasting elements into a pleasant harmony, was no longer at work. No aggregation of mortals, it has been well observed, is complete without its invalid,—the person whom all agree in treating with exceptional tenderness ; whom all combine to comfort, to amuse, to cheat of some of the tedium of a

day of suffering ; to whom all show their nicest, brightest, pleasantest aspect ; in whose presence the strife and bustle and harshness of workaday life are hushed into a more genial, more courteous mood. Lady Heriot's death robbed her friends of a social centre. Without her they were lost in chaos, wandering aimlessly in the cold spaces of indifference.

Poor Crucible was inconsolable. The main occupation of his non-official day was gone, and gone with it the zest of life. His choicest pleasure, his warmest interest was extinguished. The Englishman is, above everything, a stoic, and Crucible displayed a stoical composure. But his heart was sore within him. He sat at the Athenæum reading gloomily, or trying to read, at times which for years past he had been accustomed to consecrate to his lost friend. Many things which he read now, with a sudden lack of interest, suggested only the thought,

‘How this would have amused her! How hearty would have been her laugh! How her eye would have lit up with kindly interest, with generous sympathy, with honest indignation!’ Stonehouse, too, concealed his sorrow from the general eye. He appeared in Court—cold, determined, adamant as ever—cross-examined witnesses, intimidated counsel, coerced the wavering minds of juries with logic carefully adapted to their capacity, poured out his torrent of precedent and argument on a patient but suffering Court, stuck to his points with exasperating pertinacity. But, adamant as Stonehouse succeeded in making his outward man appear, his stoicism was only skin-deep. Beneath this stolid exterior there burnt a romantic sentiment of regret. Life had grown perceptibly darker, colder, less interesting, less worth living, less endurable.

There are moments when the business of human existence seems an idiotic waste of

nerve and muscle ; its triumphs a hollow mockery ; its gains mere dust and ashes. Stonehouse was in such a mood—all because a certain drawing-room in Seymour Street had a new tenant, and an infirm old lady had, in the fulness of years, come to the end of her infirmities.

At Huntsham, when once the shock of Lady Heriot's death was over, life flowed smoothly and dully in its accustomed channels. Sir Adrian brooded on his wrongs, and found relief and satisfaction in demonstrating them to Lady Eugenia. Nothing would shake his conviction that he had been defrauded, and that Isabella was the wrong-doer.

Mrs. Hazelden warmly abetted him. 'I should wish the will to be contested,' she said, 'if only that some good lawyer might have Isabella in the witness-box for half an hour and cross-examine her.'

It was in vain that Mr. Graves wrote

that counsel's opinion on the case was discouraging. Stonehouse, to whom it had been submitted, was, after a long consultation, obliged to admit that it would be hopeless, as matters now stood, to contest the will.

‘I do not care,’ cried Mrs. Hazelden, ‘for Mr. Stonehouse's opinion or any one else's. I knew my own mother best. I am perfectly confident that she never, while in her right senses and of her own free will, would have left the money away from Adrian. In no case could I have believed it. Her behaviour on her deathbed makes it a thousandfold more incredible.’

In the meantime his mother's death had brought Sir Adrian some immediate relief in money matters. He had no longer her jointure charge to pay. He came in, with the other children, for a legacy of £5000, and this enabled him to sweep off a long list of troublesome little debts, and to feel for the

moment tolerably at ease. No decent offer could be got for Huntsham, so that the question of its sale remained necessarily in abeyance. Jack came down pretty often on Saturdays to spend a Sunday in the country with his parents. He was working hard at his art, varying his occupations, however, by occasional flights to the curate in Shoreditch. His socialism had grown very pronounced, and his visits to his home were often the occasion of animated controversies, which Sir Adrian not a little enjoyed, and which acted on his nerves as an invigorating tonic.

A more substantial enjoyment presented itself in the form of a little gathering of old friends who had accepted Lady Eugenia's invitation to spend a quiet Christmas at Huntsham. Lydia Hazelden had been always in the habit of bringing her husband and children to her brother's for the winter holidays.

Her party of boisterous children, delighted

to escape into the country, filled the dreary old house with sounds of merriment, and infected even Lady Eugenia's gentle little girls with a tendency to romp. Lydia herself, loyal, hearty, courageous in thought, and more than courageous in language, gave Lady Eugenia an agreeable sense of backbone, and infused a sudden briskness into her view of life. Crucible and Stonehouse had needed little persuasion to come to a house where all would be in tune with their own thoughts, where others mourned the friend whose loss was costing them so much. They were glad, too, in every possible way to stand by Sir Adrian. The news that Hillyard had written to propose himself was greeted with acclamation. Sir Adrian and Stonehouse had both been his friends at college. None of their contemporaries so well as Hillyard could recall the true note of academic life—its gaiety, its freshness, its intellectual enthusiasm, its literary enjoyment, its classical refine-

ment. He would take them pleasantly back to old times, old moods, old habits of thought. Unfortunately he was to come alone. Olivia was paying a visit to her kinsfolk at the Pines. Hillyard had not chosen to accompany her. Olivia's absence was deplored. Poor Crucible's disappointment was undisguised. Jack, who had been at first inclined to suspect a prearranged plot against his enjoyment, was obliged on reflection to admit to himself that it was better for his peace of mind that Olivia should not pass Christmas beneath his father's roof.

Whatever might be his inward regrets, he felt a loyal obligation to entertain his father's guests. Nor did he find his task a hard one. Sir Adrian's visitors were congenial, sympathetic, anxious to please, ready to be pleased, resolved to be cheerful under depressing conditions. There were still in the Huntsham cellars some survivors of a famous vintage, a relic of Sir Adrian's early magnifi-

cence. Sir Adrian produced the precious bottles now, and his guests did all honour to them with much affectionate recollection of bygone merry-makings. Every one felt it to be imperative to be in good spirits and help Sir Adrian and his wife in their heroic cheerfulness.

Stonehouse had bought a magnificent supply of Christmas presents for the children. Jack's artist friend, Brandon, had come with him, and proved a perfect godsend. He drew caricatures of everybody, covered the walls of the schoolroom with the scenery of Bluebeard, and sang comic songs which relaxed even the stately Stonehouse's habitual gravity and sent the juveniles into ecstasies of amusement. Broad comedy, Jack found, is really an excellent moral tonic. While Brandon with a banjo and a blackened face was performing nigger melodies at one end of the drawing-room it was impossible to be nursing melancholy at the other. Jack's face

assumed a cheerfulness which quite belied the conventional gloom of a despairing lover. Stonehouse, who had been accustomed to regard Lady Eugenia as hopelessly bad company, determined now to get on with her, and found his politeness rewarded with brilliant success. He discussed Jack's prospects at length with her, and delighted her with a generous encomium on the well-loved son. 'He is just what a young fellow ought to be, Lady Eugenia,' he said; 'frank, rash, honest, courageous. You may be well content; he is sure to do well.'

Lady Eugenia began to understand why it was that everybody thought Stonehouse's judgment so extremely good.

So the little party which gathered round Sir Adrian's hospitable board was, notwithstanding anxiety in some minds, and an undercurrent of melancholy in all, not without its share of cheerfulness.

At dinner the talk flowed fast and strong.

Stonehouse and Sir Adrian renewed the battles of their college days. Hillyard hovered over the contest like a Homeric deity, helping either party as fate or fancy prompted. Crucible contributed a seasoning of aphorism. Jack, unawed by such a congress of seniors, paraded his newest theory and last panacea for human ills, for the public edification. The party lingered round the dinner-table, as loth to quit a battlefield where victory is yet to win.

Jack's radicalism often raised a storm. The elders of the party felt it incumbent on them to do their best by satire, illustration, or argument to bring him to a proper frame of mind. He found all his fundamental principles ruthlessly assailed. 'You will admit, I suppose,' he said one night to Crucible, 'the elementary principle of modern government, that the majority must decide, and that the duty of the modern statesman is to divine their decision and to give effect to it.'

‘ The elementary principle,’ cried Crucible ; ‘ the vilest opportunism ! No, Jack ; Goethe put it rightly : “ Nothing,” he said, “ is more abhorrent to a reasonable man than an appeal to the majority ; for it consists of a few strong men who lead, of knaves who temporise, of the feeble who are hangers-on, and of the multitude who follow without the slightest idea of what they want.” Nor has the British multitude now the slightest idea of what they want except more beer and less work, and greater liberty to thrash their wives.’

‘ It is the curse of restlessness,’ said Hilliard ; ‘ our age’s curse. We all feel it. Nobody is content to be second rate ; accordingly so many are third rate. “ *Αιεν ἀριστεύειν*, you know—that sort of Achillean pretentiousness—an insane desire to be at the top of your class, puts one-half mankind against the other. But everybody cannot be at the top, or near the top.’

‘There is great comfort,’ observed Crucible, ‘in not going in for honours, if you are only likely to get a Pass. Good feeding can be had in the plains without the troublesome necessity of scaling mountain-heights in quest of it. It may not be quite such a fine flavour as the other, but it is wholesome eating, and there is more of it :

“The mountain sheep are sweeter,
The valley sheep are fatter ;
We therefore think it meeter
To carry off the latter.”’

‘The valley sheep may be tame feeding ; all the same, he gives you a rare good mutton chop.’

‘I was reading this morning,’ said Stonehouse, ‘of some real good Tories, the Tlascalans of Mexico. They held that the souls of their nobles migrated into beautiful singing birds, and the spirits of common folk into frogs, beetles, and other insignificant creatures.’

‘The wretches,’ cried Mrs. Hazelden. ‘Toadyism that ranged even to the other world! In Europe we have always had, at any rate, a purely democratic Heaven.’

‘Then,’ said Stonehouse, ‘pray what do you make of an archangel?’

‘They are chosen by merit,’ said Lydia; ‘a purely competitive examination, I am convinced.’

‘Or by seniority,’ said Crucible, ‘as they do in my office. I prefer the idea of that.’

‘At any rate,’ said Lydia, ‘they are not hereditary, which is something.’

‘Well,’ said Crucible, ‘there is the authority of Milton for believing that there are angelic footmen. What do you say to

“A thousand liveried angels lackey her”?’

‘A thousand!’ said Mrs. Hazelden. ‘Fancy! that beats even one of Lady de Renzi’s balls.’

‘But talking of promotion,’ said Hillyard,

‘I like Lord Melbourne’s dictum on the Garter. “The best of it is,” he said, “that it has no nonsense about that infernal thing they call merit.” Honours should go by accident. Then nobody is aggrieved.’

‘Except,’ said Stonehouse, ‘the unlucky people whom no good accidents befall.’

‘The world would be insupportable, however,’ said Crucible, ‘if everybody got his deserts and no one more than his deserts. When a piece of undeserved good luck befalls an official, a hundred others are cheered by the expectation that, one day or other, some kind genius will job them into something good. But then the great point about jobs, like diamonds, is that there are so few of them.’

‘And some men are always finding diamonds,’ said Hillyard, ‘and wanting more. They “warm both hands before the fire of life,” and air their portly persons at it, shutting off every ray of warmth from less fortunate neighbours.’

‘And then,’ said Stonehouse, ‘they are not, like Landor, “ready to depart.” The true jobber, or rather fortunate jobbee, like the Kings of Persia, lives for ever.’

‘Let us drink to his good health,’ said Hillyard, passing the claret bottle.

‘And to his speedy departure,’ said Crucible, as he filled his glass.

CHAPTER XXI

CHRISTMAS AT THE PINES

‘Seeing his gewgaw castle shine,
New as his title, built last year,
There amid perky larches and pine,
And over the sullen-purple moor—
Look at it—pricking a Cockney ear.’

SIR ADRIAN, like a good Christian, made a rule of forgiving his enemies, but he could scarcely be said to have forgiven his brother, and he had certainly made no single step in the direction of forgiving his sister-in-law. On the contrary, he had fully determined to cherish an eternal unforgiveness. Isabella Heriot was, as he saw her, in the predicament of those successful sinners whom it could scarcely be the duty of a good Christian to forgive. She was flourishing like a green

bay tree. She was reaping the reward of iniquity. The pangs, which at the time of Lady Heriot's death she had attributed to conscience, died away as the risk of exposure became more and more remote. When it was announced that no contest would be raised as to the validity of the will, she banished the last of her compunctions as to the mode in which its execution had been brought about. The addition of Valentine's wealth already bore fruit in the form of increased magnificence. Mrs. Heriot had a smart house, several smart carriages, and bore about in her own fair person many agreeable indications of an overflowing exchequer. She was in great request too; her dresses, her diamonds, her good looks, added to the brilliancy of many splendid gatherings. She was greatly admired, as men frequently informed her by admiring words and behaviour, women occasionally by jealous looks. Mrs. Heriot derived satisfaction

from either source. A triumphant beauty finds it easy to forgive her enemies when her enemies are mostly prostrate rivals.

There are limits, however, to all human success, dark spots in the most golden cloud, and the dark spot in Mrs. Heriot's cloud was the unwavering hostility of her husband's family. She was hopelessly estranged from the Heriots. Sir Adrian, the least vindictive of mankind, would have nothing to do with her. A sentence of eternal banishment had, she felt conscious, been pronounced against her by the rulers of Huntsham. Towards Valentine his brother felt even more bitterly, as a traitor to his family, to his own flesh and blood. A man is necessarily his wife's accomplice. Isabella would never, Sir Adrian considered, have acted as she had, but for Valentine's acquiescence, his sanction. He had added to his brother's indignation by overtures, the ostentatious generosity of which seemed only

an aggravation of his original offence. He had written to offer to buy Huntsham and to let Sir Adrian occupy the house, as long as he pleased, rent free. 'Could anything,' Sir Adrian demanded, coming into his wife's boudoir with Valentine's letter in his hand, 'could anything be more offensive—in viler taste—more odiously hypocritical? Of course Valentine knows perfectly well that I would die sooner than accept the slightest favour from him; that I would go to the workhouse sooner than let him have Huntsham. Buy it, indeed, and with the money that is mine by rights, and I to live here as his pensioner! Eugenia, I will see him damned first!'

Lady Eugenia had never before heard her husband swear. She felt now that his wrath was dire indeed. And was it undeserved? Was not his oath the solemn formula of a righteous indignation?

Sir Adrian had written the curtest and

most ungracious rejection of his brother's overtures; reinforcing the rejection by a broad hint that, in his view, there had been foul play, and that people who profited by foul play were not the people from whom honest folk cared to receive favours.

Valentine had replied with exasperating calmness and plausibility. 'If,' he wrote, 'you really think what your letter implies, your obvious course is to contest the will. For my part, I shall be glad to have it contested. I wish the matter to be sifted. The costs of such a proceeding would naturally, I believe, come out of the estate, that is, as matters stand, out of my pocket; at any rate, I agree that they shall do so. On the other hand, if you and your advisers can see as little reason to doubt the validity of the codicil as I can, pray, Adrian, have the candour to admit frankly what you dare not dispute.'

Sir Adrian remained haughty, angry, un-

reasonable to all gentle influences, all the more provoked by Valentine's having, as usual, succeeded in putting him in the wrong. Of course, in these circumstances, there could be no question of inviting the Valentines to the Huntsham Christmas party. Mrs. Heriot consoled herself with the thought that she escaped a dull and embarrassing visit; Valentine—brave it out as he would—felt depressed at not spending Christmas with his own kith and kin. Not all the attractions of a very smart party and first-rate shooting at the Pines could cure him of a wistful longing for his old home, its traditional ways, its comfortable homeliness, its effortless and unpretentious good cheer, above all, its familiarity.

Mr. Hillyard and Olivia had received an invitation, transmitted through Isabella Heriot, to come for a quiet visit at the Pines after the big party had broken up. 'I do not mean to go,' Hillyard had said at once,

when Olivia brought him the letter. 'I will not go there again. They are out of my line. I am not attached to my cousin Isabella. But she has been kind to my Olivia. That is her redeeming point. Accept their invitation, Olivia. I wish you to go. I have some things to talk over with Sir Adrian. He wants me at Huntsham. I shall feel happy if I know that you are being well amused.'

Isabella Heriot had, in fact, written with real cordiality, pressing Olivia to accept her mother's invitation. 'We shall be so glad to have you. It will be pleasant to see something of each other in peace. We have had a houseful; but almost every one has gone, and we shall be quite a small party—the Backhouses and a few gentlemen whom you met in London—Mr. Cosmo, Mr. de Renzi, Mr. Florian, whose last poem you can read up in the meanwhile, and one or two more. Do come, dear, if you can

manage it, and help us to entertain them. Let me know the day, and we will send a carriage for you.'

Why was Mrs. Heriot so kind to Olivia? Was she fascinated by her beauty, her classic mould, her attitudes of unstudied, unconscious grace? Did she meditate annexing her, as old Lady Heriot had suspected, to add a new lustre to her entertainments? Had it occurred to her that Olivia, if annexed, would be a possession, a power? that her influence might profitably be rained from Mrs. Heriot's drawing-room? Would not small *recherché* parties receive an additional aroma of delightfulness from the presence of so rare a beauty? Does not brilliant talk coruscate with fresh brilliancy when smiled upon by lovely lips? Society is, after all, a campaign, a hard-fought campaign; might not a charming girl prove a valuable ally? If it is necessary to attract in a world where there are many

counter-attractions, is it not well to have in one's keeping the magnet of which all mortals own the attraction? Or had De Renzi given her a hint of his readiness to explore a little further the innocent freshness of Olivia's unsophisticated nature? Had Olivia been the bait wherewith to tempt so distinguished, so choice a guest to her father's house? Was Mrs. Heriot but obeying her natural instincts as a match-maker? Was she dazzled by the possibility of a splendid match?

It was a wild idea, certainly—that De Renzi—the ambitious, the cynical, the worldly-wise, the cool hand, the cold heart, *blasé* with the experience of many splendid opportunities—should ever link his name, his fortunes, his expectations, with a penniless girl, who would bring to her lover no accession of any sort, either of money, influence, or social position, nothing, in fact, except a captivating face, a graceful form, a

lively wit. Still, strange things happen ; the most improbable matches achieve themselves. Nothing in matrimony is so inevitable as the unexpected. Men constantly marry in a way that defies all explanation, certainly all anticipation. Hope springs eternal in the match-maker's breast, untrammelled by tame calculations of the probable. If ever this incalculable conjuncture were to come about, Olivia's fortune would be made, and Mrs. Valentine's reputation established at a level beyond her wildest dreams. Dared she to hope ? Scarcely ; but so delightful a possibility, even in the vaguest shade of remote likelihood, may have forbidden her to despair.

Who shall read the riddle of a woman's heart ? Anyhow, Mrs. Heriot's letter accomplished its object. Olivia wrote to accept the invitation, and a carriage from the Pines arrived in due course to bear her and her fortunes to the scene of action.

CHAPTER XXII

OLIVIA AMONG THE PHILISTINES

Tresham. Malignant tongue ! Detect one fault in him ;
I challenge you.

Gwendolen. . . . Witchcraft's a fault in him,
For you're bewitched.'

OLIVIA, as she drove along by herself on her journey to the Pines, and reviewed her position, was besieged by a disagreeable conviction that she was steering into dangerous seas. The prospect of her visit was exciting ; a houseful of strangers has always some terrors for the youthful soul. Olivia was, indeed, going among her kinsmen ; but they were kinsmen whose scant courtesy to her father had sometimes justified the cynical view that the chief use of relation-

ship is to give poignancy to unkindness. To Olivia they all, especially Isabella Heriot, had been more than kind. Her father, she knew, disliked Isabella ; but Olivia, who had heard only vague accounts of the story of Lady Heriot's will, knew but a portion of his reasons for disliking her. It was natural that he should ; they had no interest or taste in common. For herself, Olivia shared many of Mrs. Heriot's interests and tastes. She understood the attraction of society — the pleasures that life promises to the votaries who court its enjoyments aright. Those pleasures seemed to Olivia, from the small specimen of which she had personal experience, extremely delightful. Moreover, she enjoyed the sensation of being petted, as she always was, by her cousin. Isabella had wooed her with a hundred small caresses, with little kindnesses, easy to confer but pleasant to receive, with flatteries that steep the human soul in contentment.

But it was not with her cousin that Olivia's thoughts were principally busy. The casual announcement in Mrs. Heriot's letter that De Renzi was to be of the party brought vividly to mind the most exciting epoch of her life—the person who had contributed most powerfully to that excitement. Her horizon had been enlarged by a most interesting experience. In the quiet of her home, in the fruition of small pleasures, in the discharge of commonplace duties, that interesting experience had frequently presented itself. In it the personage of De Renzi occupied a foremost place. His character, as shown on the few occasions in which they had met, shaped itself in distinct outline to her mind's eye. Olivia could not but admit that it was impressive. He was not a man about whom it was easy to feel quite indifferent, even in remembering him. To ignore him, to forget him, was impossible; to pretend to forget him, hypocritical. His

behaviour to her in London had been the greatest compliment that Olivia had ever yet received. It had been paid by one whose compliments were not to be despised. De Renzi had sought her society ; he had devoted himself to amusing her, to pleasing her ; he had established a personal relationship, strictly proper to themselves. He had courted her friendship. Could such things be experienced without excitement, remembered without emotion ? Olivia's acquaintance with her brilliant friend had abruptly closed, like an unfinished air. They were now to meet again. Was the air to be renewed, completed ? Would change of scene and circumstance—the lapse of a few months—have altered De Renzi, have altered her ? Were they to take up the thread of their friendship at the point at which they had dropped it ? Their encounter could not fail to be interesting ; for that very reason it was somewhat formidable. Once again

Olivia experienced the pang of cowardice which De Renzi's proximity had on previous occasions inspired. She recognised her former fear.

Tea was going on when Olivia was ushered into the drawing-room. The shooters had just come in and were sitting round the fire. De Renzi was not among them. Everybody was very gracious. Mrs. Valentine was as kind as possible, took possession of the newcomer, carried her away to the tea-table, chatted pleasantly to her, and inquired about the Huntsham party.

De Renzi presently made his appearance and put Olivia's cowardice to flight. He was cordial, natural, and reassuring. He established himself by her side, and was evidently bent upon a chat. Mrs. Valentine soon retired, and De Renzi began at once to be confidential.

'It is so nice that you have come,' he said. 'I heard that you were to be here,

and stayed on in hopes of meeting you. I was beginning to be afraid that the hope was a false one. Now we will enjoy ourselves.'

The old sense of a special understanding common to themselves alone, was at once established. No one else knew the secret of De Renzi's coming to the Pines, of his lingering on when the rest of the party had gone. As he had come to the ball in London, so now, it was for her. That circumstance, well understood, would colour all their future relations during the visit. They were friends whose society was mutually agreeable. Their intercourse, broken off abruptly in London, was now to be renewed. They were to enjoy the opportunity to the full.

How to resist friendship so cordially, so flatteringly proffered! De Renzi was, Olivia found, beyond any one she had ever known, easy, pleasant to talk to. With him conver-

sation flowed on of itself, effortless, unconstrained, unconscious. Then some of the party would come up, and De Renzi would change his tone at once, and go off in a blaze of fireworks. Mirth is infectious to some natures. Olivia always 'took it' directly. She often found herself joining in the fireworks.

Even Cosmo was interested. 'Your beautiful *débutante*,' he said to his hostess, 'is generally a fool—meant to be looked at, not talked to. This girl is like quicksilver. De Renzi will have a good time of it.'

Still Cosmo was the one of the gentlemen with whom Olivia could least get on. This was unlucky, for he was the one most frequently at hand. He abhorred field sports, and seldom travelled farther than the billiard-room. His favourite way of spending the day was in the most comfortable corner of the drawing-room, with

no severer intellectual strain than a novel to read or a lady to talk to. The massacre of pheasants, long tramps after partridges, the laborious vicissitudes of the hunting-field, were well enough for persons so partially civilised as Englishmen, who had rude health, iron nerves, and a great deal of superfluous energy to dispose of; but it was sheer insanity to mar the quiet of a cultivated existence by such barbarous expedients. Cosmo rejected all proposals of sport, and was always available for attendance on the ladies, so long as he was not taken too far from the fire.

‘It is too selfish of you,’ Mrs. Heriot had said, when, one bleak afternoon, she had tried in vain to induce him to join them in a severe constitutional—‘too selfish to sit there, warming your feet over the bars, when we women are going to brave the cold!’

‘The philosophy of selfishness is the

philosophy of Hobbes,' said Cosmo complacently, drawing his chair in to the fire. 'It is freezing, I believe. I have an agreeable volume here. I must ask you to excuse me.'

He had heard of the prospect of Olivia's arrival with mock dismay. He was very much at home at the Pines, and very comfortable. They were a pleasant party; it would not be improved by the admixture of another and an incongruous element.

'There is a young lady coming here to-morrow—a beauty!' Valentine had told him in the smoking-room the night before. 'What do you say to that, Cosmo? Are you not delighted?'

Florian came into the room in time to hear the announcement. 'Man delights not him,' he cried, 'nor woman either—not even that especially delightful form of woman, the young lady. But remember, Cosmo, we cannot get on without ladies, and, if we are

to have them at all, we must have them young some time or other. It is a disease they get cured of only too quickly.'

'The right thing to do with them,' said Cosmo, 'is what the Frenchmen do—send them out of the room before the talk begins. They stop conversation.'

'But the modern young lady,' said Valentine, 'will not go out of the room. She is afraid of nothing and shocked at nothing. She knows more than her chaperon, and is not so easily frightened.'

'Yes,' said Cosmo. 'Nowadays

"Girls rush in where mothers fear to tread."

They want to be everywhere. This girl will want to come and smoke with us and hear Florian's stories.'

'Not she!' said Valentine. 'She is a little piece of rustic saintliness—a lily of the valley.'

'Why not leave her in the valley?

answered Cosmo. 'Mrs. Grundy is bad enough, but Miss Grundy is the devil.'

'Miss Grundy,' observed Florian, exploding a bottle of Apollinaris into his tumbler, 'is a nuisance to us poor authors. We have to abandon many fine things lest she should come upon them and find them unimproving or shocking.'

'If ever,' said Cosmo sententiously, 'I wrote a book (which, thank Heaven, is the one sin I shall leave unattempted) I should wish to write for those who could not be shocked and did not want to be improved. I look forward to Miss Grundy's arrival with interest.'

'And I,' said Florian, 'with rapture. I am devoted to young ladies, because I can never understand them. Woman, like a conundrum, loses all her interest when you are able to guess her.'

'And I,' said Crucible, 'dislike them out of envy, I suppose, for being young. It is

so hard that the young should have all the good things—beauty, innocence, enthusiasm, and the rest—just at the time when they can best afford to do without them. The order of events should be reversed, if I had my way. We should be born senile, prejudiced, decrepit, feeble, obstinate, gouty, wicked, mean—a hundred years old, in fact : then gradually improve into the respectable mediocrity of middle age ; ripen, in course of time, into stalwart manhood ; blossom from that into strong and beautiful youth ; and at last, in the fulness of years, pass into the blessed innocence of infancy, and die a little baby, and go straight to Abraham's bosom.'

'Beautiful idea!' cried Florian ; 'you can expound it to Miss Grundy to-morrow!'

'But,' said Florian, 'the male young lady is not so bad as the converse phenomenon, the female young gentleman.'

'I object to epicene phenomena,' said

Cosmo; 'they should be decently interned. Some specialist in philanthropy should devise a retreat for them.'

'The Middlesex Hospital,' suggested De Renzi.

'Well,' said Cosmo, 'I stick to my creed that the fairer sex should, in a proper world, consist exclusively of married women.'

'And cynical bachelors,' said Florian. 'What a prospect for humanity!'

Whatever might be Cosmo's views, Olivia's presence was to one member of the party its principal attraction. De Renzi had never felt a woman's charm so potent as Olivia's. Her beauty fascinated him; but beauty alone would not have been enough; nor was beauty Olivia's only spell. De Renzi had known many beauties, who had tried in vain to charm him, as he had tried in vain to be charmed. But he found in Olivia a fineness of quality, an originality, a delicate taste, an unconscious dignity, such as his pre-

vious experience had never shown him. Her greatest charm was that it never occurred to her to try to charm. De Renzi began to doubt whether, after all, the many nice people with whom he had come in contact were really the very nicest. Olivia was something more choice, more refined, more really clever. Her absolute innocence worked on him like a spell. 'Why,' her eyes seemed to say, 'should any one conceal the truth?' Candour so revealed was irresistible.

Thus De Renzi found Olivia the most interesting study that he had ever encountered. He had no thought of marrying her. The idea was inconceivable; but he resolved that, if the Fates permitted, Olivia should be a most especial friend. The Fates, always propitious, were now indulging him with an excellent opportunity of cultivating her friendship.

CHAPTER XXIII

SOME ESOTERIC POLITICS

‘Pray, be content :
Mother, I am going to the market-place ;
Chide me no more. I’ll mountebank their loves,
Cog their hearts from them, and come home beloved
Of all the trades in Rome.’

APART from the amusement which she afforded to De Renzi, Olivia’s arrival at the Pines proved extremely opportune. To some ladies of the party it brought relief, relief of a tension which was becoming distressingly apparent, and which, if prolonged, might have led to a catastrophe. This state of things arose from the circumstance that the companionship of Mrs. Backhouse had an unsteady effect on Mrs. Heriot’s

nerves. She affected her in a peculiar and disagreeable manner. She aroused that part of her sensibilities which a woman who cares for inward peace must least desire to have called to life—her jealousy. Mrs. Heriot was anything but a jealous woman. To those who did not cross her ends or come into pronounced competition in her own especial domain she was good nature itself. No one knew better than she how to live and let live; nor did she grudge her neighbour's success or resent another woman's triumphs over the feeble heart of man. There are limits, however, to everything; and Theresa Backhouse represented the point at which Mrs. Heriot's magnanimity broke down. Valentine and other gentlemen of her acquaintance admired Mrs. Backhouse with a fervour which Valentine's wife regarded as extravagant. Mrs. Backhouse was by no means a clever woman, but her *naïveté*, backed by her good looks, did as

well as cleverness. The *naïveté* with which she played the part of *ingénue* and made innocent remarks was irresistible. Mrs. Valentine had admired it at first, but she had grown tired of it, and tired of Mrs. Backhouse. Valentine had, of course, his privileges of amusement, just as Mrs. Heriot had hers; one of his privileges was to flirt with Mrs. Backhouse. His wife regarded the proceeding with contemptuous indifference. When, however, Mrs. Backhouse began to set her cap at De Renzi it was past a joke. Isabella's equanimity was endangered. The consequence was that, under an exterior of the utmost sweetness and with many professions of affection, Mrs. Heriot would, when opportunity offered, give her dearest friend a little stab. In return, Mrs. Backhouse, who was amiability itself, if unprovoked, was not averse to occasions which enabled her to retaliate upon her assailant with an acid drop. In the sublime

precincts of Olympus the Queen of Heaven and the Queen of Beauty could not, we know, adjust their relations without some sharp resentments and an occasional outbreak. The fires of jealousy glow even in celestial breasts. They were now glowing fiercely at the Pines. There was an armed neutrality. It would not have suited either of the rival powers to go to war. A quarrel was not to be thought of. But, without going to war, it is possible to have a disputed frontier, unadjusted grievances, and an occasional skirmish. During the last fortnight the opportunities for these polite stabs and affectionate drops of acid had been more frequent than was good for Isabella Heriot's serenity. Mrs. Backhouse had come in an especially charming mood, and with a number of especially charming dresses. She had carried the gentlemen by storm. Her skating costume, with its effective contrasts of colour and pretty arrangements of fur, was

pronounced a *chef-d'œuvre*. Her foot was historical. When Mrs. Backhouse essayed to skate, even Cosmo left the fireside, and, barricading himself in a movable fortress of sealskin, came courageously down to the ice to help her. Mrs. Backhouse, with a gentleman on either side, glided with the grace of a sylph, tottered, struggled, and fell at last with the dignity of the falling Cæsar. Everybody felt it to be delightful. De Renzi, who had learnt to skate in Holland, and was a real adept, devoted himself for the rest of the afternoon to initiating the lovely neophyte into the mysteries of the outside edge. Mrs. Backhouse declared that no one could teach her but De Renzi, and that with him she felt perfect confidence. De Renzi, greatly in need of an opportunity of amusement, naturally took the first that presented itself, and acquiesced. Valentine was forthwith deposed from his accustomed dignities. Mrs. Valentine naturally

felt aggrieved for her husband and herself. The hour of retribution had now struck. With Olivia in the house, Mrs. Backhouse was nowhere in the race for De Renzi. She herself felt it instinctively, and bent to the inevitable. It was in vain that De Renzi still continued to offer the ostentatious homage of profuse compliment. There was no concealment, scarcely an attempt at concealment. De Renzi had deserted her without a scruple and without a blush. After a few ineffectual struggles Mrs. Backhouse fell back resignedly on Valentine, and Mrs. Heriot had the satisfaction of reflecting that De Renzi was doing exactly what she wished. Meanwhile the *entente cordiale* was restored. The two ladies went amiably for a walk together in the park. Peace had returned. Olivia was the unconscious bearer of the olive-branch. She was as welcome as bearers of the olive-branch deserve to be.

Many things at the Pines astonished her, most of all the conversation. She seemed to have passed behind the scenes. The talkers knew about everything, criticised everybody, and mentioned as notorious a hundred stories which fell on Olivia's ear like the echoes of a disagreeable fairyland. She learnt that the real gossip of London is that which does not make its appearance in newspapers, or reach the ears of common folk. She heard many things which, but that all around her received them as unquestionably true, she would have considered incredible. De Renzi talked about politics in a way that made him seem more than ever mysterious. He was an active supporter of a Radical administration ; but no one, to judge him by his present language, was less of a Radical in feeling or belief. None of Mr. Grandiose's young lieutenants rolled off more glibly the sonorous variations of standard Radical cries, 'Confidence in the people,' 'Trusting the

democracy,' 'The wise instincts of the nation,' conjured more brilliantly with Mr. Grandiose's name, or denounced with more incisive rhetoric the narrowness and selfishness of the decrepit class, which the democracy had already reduced to powerlessness and would presently drive off the field.

Olivia had, since her return from London, read some of these passages with enthusiasm and delight. She had sympathised with the applausive shouts in which they had closed: she accepted their assumptions; she was convinced by them; she was profoundly moved. It had not occurred to her innocence to distrust their sincerity. She now learnt with amazement that the young democrat had the smallest possible sympathy with the objects of his praises, and the faintest possible belief in the remedies which he extolled. No one was really more cynically undemocratic. Some inconsistencies in politics are, he airily explained, inevitable. Allowance must be

made for the necessities of party, of rhetoric. 'In party, you naturally select the winning side, just as in speculation you go in for a rising stock. In England just now democracy is on the boom. Everybody sees it, even Lord Mumpsimus. It is coming; it has come: the game is up. *Sauve qui peut!* The best way of saving yourself is to put yourself at the head of the advancing battalions, stimulate them to heroic exertions, and lead them to victory! What is the good of fighting a battle you are sure to lose,—which is already lost? Cato, I believe, and people of that sort love a fallen cause. Reasonable men—I among them—are for the gods and victory!'

'But how about enthusiasm for one's cause, standing or falling?' asked Olivia.

'The greatest possible enthusiasm,' said De Renzi cheerfully. 'Why not? Human beings are so happily constructed that if you get enough of them together and shout

familiar phrases at them loud enough and long enough, they go into a sort of hysterics, and hysteria is a great political method, because one of its symptoms is to believe oneself convinced. It is like tickling children. The only thing, of course, is to tickle them, to give them what they like and as they like it,—the accustomed phrases, the popular names. The man who does this best is the best public speaker and the greatest man !’

‘You talk in parables,’ said Olivia ; ‘and this is a darker parable than usual. Of course you are joking.’

‘I never joke on serious subjects,’ said De Renzi ; ‘religion, politics, or ladies’ dresses ! Seriously then, if you have got a flock of geese to drive, you must get them along as best you can. The English, you know, are not a particularly intelligent race.’

‘No,’ said Olivia, ‘not with all their education ?’

‘No,’ said De Renzi, ‘not even with all their education. We

“——blow upon them with loud wordy mouth
Through watchword phrases, jest or sentiment,
Which drive our burly brutal English mobs,
Like so much chaff, whichever way we will.”

But the secret of secrets is to know just how and when to blow, and of course to blow them the way which they wish to go.’

‘And which way do they want to go now?’ asked Olivia.

‘Which way?’ cried De Renzi. ‘The road to ruin, the road to Avernus. We are already there; you can hear the roar of the waves. We are already in the surf, in the Revolution!’

‘Are we?’ said Mrs. Backhouse, looking up from her embroidery and letting her hands, which were among her strong points, lie in a lovely pose in her lap. ‘I had no idea that matters had gone so far. But your plan, Mr.

de Renzi, seems rather like trying to ride the whirlwind, does it not ?’

‘The only way to deal with whirlwinds,’ said De Renzi. ‘Riding them is, no doubt, exciting exercise while it lasts. One rides for a fall, of course.’

‘And when you fall, you fall like Lucifer,’ said Mr. Goldingham, ‘and fall as far. No one can say when the fall will come. For my part, I prefer to leave the whirlwind alone. Mrs. Backhouse and I are Conservatives, are we not ?’

‘Of course,’ said the lady ; ‘but Mr. de Renzi’s seems to be only another form of Conservatism—self-preservation.’

‘Conservatism,’ said Cosmo, looking up from his novel, ‘like charity, begins at home. That man’s the best Conservative who takes best care of number one.’

Olivia began to understand that politics were not quite so simple a business as her ignorance and innocence had supposed.

CHAPTER XXIV

ALAS, POOR YORICK !

‘Sic cum transierint mei,
Nullo cum strepitu, dies
Plebeius moriar senex :
Illi mors gravis incubat,
Qui, notus nimis omnibus,
Ignotus moritur sibi.’

THE days passed pleasantly at the Pines. The party was agreeable. Its smallness gave it a tone of ease and familiarity. Everybody was on good terms with all the rest. The men talked brilliantly, Olivia thought, and made the meals amusing. There was a growing sense of good companionship. Florian read them some passages from his new poem and invited the public to criticise or commend. Cosmo's hoard of stories showed no symptom

of exhaustion. Mrs. Backhouse bore her deposition like an angel, and was amiable even to Olivia. Valentine satisfactorily re-established his relations with the dethroned beauty. The weather was wild, but that only heightened the effect of the good cheer which reigned indoors. The house was luxurious; everything was supremely comfortable. Host, hostess, and guests were too good friends to be ceremonious. Each went his own way. In the mornings De Renzi was often buried for some hours in red boxes which arrived for him from Downing Street—enough, as Cosmo said, to swamp an administration; but he would emerge at luncheon-time as fresh as ever, his zest for sociability only quickened by a morning of solitary toil. His holiday, such as it was, had nearly ended; but meanwhile Olivia found him an excellent companion, so gay, so full of amusing talk, so inspiring. She was conscious of a fresh faculty of conversation when De Renzi was

of the party, a new faculty of mirth. She understood now how it was that people pronounced him delightful. She was afraid of him no longer. Why should she be afraid? He was her friend, as by a hundred small signals he made her every day more distinctly understand. He was a delightful friend! Alas! Olivia was young enough not to know what complications, disappointments, heartaches, delightful friends may easily produce. She knew only that De Renzi's presence lit up her world with sudden brightness, filled it with new interest. She knew not the secret of the charm, but she knew the result. She was under the spell. This man, she became aware, could interest, influence, dominate her; could force her convictions, could mould her very tastes. It was alarming but delightful.

All mortal things, delightful friendships among them, have their fated close. One morning, when the party assembled for break-

fast, Mr. Goldingham announced that De Renzi was gone. A special messenger had come for him from London, and he had left by the next train. The blow was sudden. The effect was felt to be depressing. The prevailing good spirits received a shock. The gaiety of the party was eclipsed. Olivia especially felt anything but gay. It was some consolation that, by the evening post, there arrived a note to her from De Renzi, wishing her adieu, full of regrets at his departure, of expressions of pleasure in his visit. Olivia knew perfectly *why* it had been pleasant to him.

Two days after, Olivia's own visit came to a sudden end. A letter arrived from her father announcing that he had come back from Huntsham extremely poorly. He had caught a chill on a cold afternoon's walk with Sir Adrian, and had neglected it. He was now in great pain and felt ill. He had sent for the doctor. Olivia must come home and take care of him.

Olivia lost not an hour in obeying her father's summons. She was greatly perturbed, for she knew that it could be no trifling malady which forced her father to such decided steps. Some calamity awaited her. She sat with beating heart, as she drove homeward, tortured by suspense. Her forebodings were just. When she got home the doctor met her at the door, with a grave face that heralded misfortune. Her father was in bed upstairs, very seriously ill. His vitality seemed low ; the case was one of some anxiety. Mr. Hillyard would be all the better for Olivia's nursing. They must hope for the best.

A mandate to hope for the best, thus given, is really a message of despair. Olivia's hopes, when she had once seen her father, sank low indeed. Hillyard showed no symptoms of rallying, offered no resistance to the illness that was hourly now gaining on his enfeebled powers. He lay, a mere wreck of his former self. The sweet bright smile with

which he greeted his daughter alone remained unchanged.

Olivia bent over him, put her face by his, and burst into an agony of tears. Father and child felt that the end was near. Their happy time together was at a close. Death was knocking at the door.

A fortnight later Olivia stood chief mourner, amid a little crowd of village folk, all mourners for the kind friend whose kindness they would experience no more. They shared Olivia's sorrow ; there was not a cottage where Hill-yard's kindly presence and sympathy had not, in some moment of trouble, breathed comfort, patience, hope. A handful of peasants, a humble grave, a few loving tears, were all the funeral honours that told that poor Hill-yard's career, once bright with such golden promise of success, was closed. 'A life of mistakes—the offspring of a certain moral grandeur, ill matched with meanness of opportunities,' ill matched too with some infirmities

of will and purpose that put the prizes of life beyond his reach—still a man to be loved. Olivia turned heart-broken from his grave to the home that would be hers no more. She was alone in the world.

An empty carriage which had arrived from the Pines with a wreath of hothouse flowers, proclaimed the cold recognition of kinsmanship which satisfied Mr. Goldingham's view of what the occasion demanded. It was a dreary compliment, a pleasantry which poor Hillyard, had he been alive to see it, would not have been slow to appreciate. Sir Adrian and his wife, however, had come in person and stood on either side of Olivia as she knelt weeping at the grave. Sir Adrian looked very sad as he led Olivia away. He too had lost a friend.

Her father's death seemed to Olivia like the end of all things. It was impossible, she thought, that she should find again a companion in every way so congenial. The

father's and daughter's tastes completely harmonised. She loved his very shortcomings, his disorder, his dilatoriness, his unconventional and haphazard way of scrambling through existence; the philosophical light-heartedness with which he took the troubles of life. Under a careless exterior she recognised his cultured taste, his true refinement, his spotless honour. She had loved to pet him, to smooth his path, to free it from troublesome, petty obstructions, to defend it from the indignities that dulness is ever ready to offer to genius in difficulties, to lavish on him the tenderness of an affectionate nature. With him she always felt herself hovering between pathos and mirth. All her woman's tenderness flew to arms to champion him against the misappreciation of a dull, conventional world. They had been sad sometimes, but their melancholy was lit with flashes of redeeming merriment. The two had often had moments of depression, but both felt that

in each other's society it was easy to be gay. Congenial companionship is the best fountain of good spirits; each new trouble only made father and daughter realise their congeniality more completely. Together they had faced their troubles and made light of them.

This happiness was Olivia's no more.

These pleasant times had passed away. They belonged to a vanished world. How could any others, as bright, sweet, and innocent, be hers again? All things around looked cold, gray, repulsive. Everybody seemed commonplace, prosaic, matter-of-fact. The gaiety of existence was extinguished; and, its gaiety extinct, how rough and cold and uninviting the stern facts of life stood out!

Her uncle, Dr. Meredith, stayed on after the funeral, and proceeded to establish himself *in loco parentis*. In a father's place, indeed! but he was the very antithesis of her father, —gloomy, precise, business-like, somewhat

stern to those who lacked habits of business or failed to appreciate the business aspects of life. He at once became master of the situation. Poor Hillyard had appointed him his executor ; as such he went ruthlessly into the accounts, and speedily gave Olivia a clearer idea of their finances than the united efforts of her father and herself had ever, in times past, succeeded in achieving. When one or two big debts to the Bank and a host of little ones to tradesmen had been cleared off, and a serious bill for dilapidations of the Rectory had been met, the residue would be but a pittance. Hillyard had insured his life for £1000, but even this scanty patrimony would not, Olivia learnt, remain intact. As Olivia's guardian, Dr. Meredith lost no time in letting her feel the hand of authority. How different from her father's gentle sway, too gentle to be felt otherwise than in the form of a caress ! Olivia had now her living to earn. She might earn it, her uncle pointed

out, among her own kinsfolk, in an easy, comfortable manner, if she chose to come and live in his house and take charge of her cousins. He produced a letter from her aunt which seemed to Olivia's eye to bristle with bad taste. There was much matter-of-fact, conventional condolence. But, among the expressions of sympathy, there was disagreeably apparent a quiet depreciation of her father, a vigilant attention to Mrs. Meredith's own and her family's interest, a desire to carry through an advantageous arrangement. Her uncle pressed the point with quiet insistence. As her guardian he decided that this was the proper course. It would enable him to watch over her effectually, to discharge his duty to his kinsman's child. He could not consent to let her go at large upon the world, to find her way into some family of strangers, where all sorts of difficulties and annoyances might befall her.

Olivia's heart sank to the lowest depths of

depression. She remembered that dreadful house,—its dingy precision, its meaningless routine, its graceless economies, its mirthless bustle, its repulsive meals. No thought of the beauties of existence found a place in that dreary scheme of life. Many of life's enjoyments, beauties, interests, were, according to her uncle's creed, positively wrong ; all were unnecessary.

Olivia had escaped, on the previous occasion, with a sensation of moral asphyxia, to the pleasant liberty and disorder of her home. The same horrid sense of suffocation beset her once again at the bare notion of return.

Unattractive as the proposal seemed, it was difficult to suggest any alternative. A momentary respite was afforded by Lady Eugenia's invitation to pay them a visit at Huntsham ; but it was but momentary. It must end, Olivia well knew, at the first moment when Jack was likely to return to

his home. On the whole there appeared to be no course open to her but to submit to her uncle's proposal. It was settled that Olivia should go to Huntsham for a fortnight, and then take up her permanent residence with the Merediths at Axborough.

Several dreary months followed—the dreariest that Olivia had ever known, more dreary than any she could have conceived. The younger cousins were common, dull, and refractory; the task of teaching them—of trying to teach them anything—was a grievous one. Olivia's teaching was quite unsuited to the stolid British boys, who were trudging, with reluctant steps, through the Latin grammar, or little girls whose musical antipathies were struggling hard against uncongenial acquaintance with the pianoforte. Olivia had learnt all that she knew—she hardly knew how—by the quick apprehension of appreciative insight. Her father's mood, his tastes, had infected her; she had learnt

without effort because she loved the teacher and the lesson, and love lightened the task. Olivia, accordingly, was ignorant of many things which, according to her uncle's standard, every properly educated young woman ought to know ; and what she did know she found it difficult to impart to natures the very opposite of her own. Her pupils evinced no interest, and made no progress. One attempt after another collapsed in dismal failure. Olivia's despondency deepened ; the school-room became a torture-chamber to all concerned, but the tortures of the instructress were, probably, the most acute. Olivia's nerves began to suffer. The horrid notes of practisings, when the same blunder recurred day after day with exasperating regularity, sounded in her ears at night, and filled her dreams with discords. Her uncle wore disapproval on a moody brow ; her aunt showed disappointment by a reproving manner. The children sank ever into darker depths of stolidity.

Then came a still graver trouble. The little children were bad enough, but there were children no longer little, who were of an age to inflict still more dreadful persecution. The eldest son was studying medicine with the view of, some day, assisting his father and ultimately succeeding him. He was a dreadful youth—vulgar, commonplace, impertinent, and, above all—horror of horrors—amorous. Olivia felt a revolting conviction that the ogre—as she described him in her thoughts—was not to be discouraged by any arts of repulsion of which she felt herself mistress. She knew, too often, that his dreadful eye was fixed upon her with the languishment of unspoken love. He embarrassed her with an officious politeness, clumsy but expressive. He waylaid her with hateful kindnesses, with flatteries and compliments, with cousinly familiarities, from which her soul recoiled. Olivia felt, and tried to look, like a stone. But in vain!

The dreadful crisis came. The ogre spoke his passion, his hopes ; insisted upon knowing his fate, and, knowing it, behaved like a boor, parading his disappointment in gloomy rudeness, which added a new horror to Dr. Meredith's table. It is always rash, a clever writer has observed, to underrate the capacity of the future for being disagreeable. Olivia had never imagined that anything in life could be quite so disagreeable as that which she was now experiencing.

The ogre's mother took his part, and treated Olivia as though she had been guilty of a delinquency. Dr. Meredith broached the subject, and observed, in his dryest manner, that he regretted Olivia's evident determination to have nothing to do with her cousins.

‘Nothing to do with marrying them, if you please, uncle,’ Olivia said with determination. ‘I am very sorry that the idea should have been started. Believe me, it is wholly impossible.’

Then Dr. Meredith had become dryer than ever, and was sometimes not even polite. It was a relief to all parties concerned when, as the summer was coming on, and Axborough was beginning to look its grimmest in contrast with Nature's smiling mood, there came a kind letter from Mrs. Goldingham, inviting Olivia to pay a long visit at the Pines. Isabella would, Mrs. Goldingham wrote, be there for a portion of the time. Little Antinous had already arrived with his nurse, and would be thankful for Olivia's companionship, as indeed they all would.

Dr. Meredith, not reluctant to end a bad bargain, at once consented. Olivia shook off the dust of Axborough from her feet, and caught, with gleeful expectancy, at a temporary respite from her troubles. Nothing could be quite so bad as what she had been bearing of late.

Olivia found her life at the Pines a delightful contrast to her recent miseries. She

was her own mistress, except for such easy ministrations as a young lady can pleasantly offer to the mistress of a luxurious house. She enjoyed driving about with Mrs. Goldingham in carriages whose swift smooth motion contrasted agreeably with the dreary trudges, through dust or mud, which formed part of her Axborough day. She enjoyed paying visits with her at neighbouring houses, where she always found a kindly welcome. She enjoyed playing with little Antinous, who was at the precise stage when childish cleverness is most amusing. Everything became still pleasanter when Mrs. Heriot arrived, and showed at once that her liking for Olivia had undergone no abatement. Olivia, in her mourning, looked prettier than ever, and Isabella's mind was more than ever resolved on annexation. Olivia belonged, she felt certain, to the efficacious order of beings whose agreeable prerogative it is to sway mankind. There was something in her air

that gave her beauty a special efficacy. Mrs. Heriot had played with the idea of having that success achieved from her own house and under her own superintendence.

At the close of the summer the Heriots were to go to Scotland. Olivia was greatly delighted at being invited to accompany them. 'It is very dull, I ought to warn you,' Mrs. Heriot said; 'there is nothing to do, and no one within a dozen miles to speak to. The men are out all day, and too tired to do anything but go to sleep in the evenings. Their thoughts are of grouse, salmon, and deer—how best to kill them. It grows a little monotonous. If you will come and keep me company, Olivia, and help to amuse us all, it will be a charity.'

To Scotland accordingly Olivia went with the Heriots and Backhouses, who shared the moor. In these agreeable surroundings her life at her uncle's seemed already like a horrid dream. Even the ogre faded into

indistinctness, and was forgiven and forgotten. Olivia took charge of Antinous's education, and pronounced him a little genius. The weeks slipped monotonously but pleasantly away. At last the moment arrived when Mrs. Heriot's scheme was to become a solid fact. One day, as their time in Scotland was drawing to a close, she summoned Olivia for a serious talk, and made a definite proposal, on her own part and her husband's, that Olivia should come and take up her abode permanently with them in London. 'Not that permanence means much in such a case,' Mrs. Heriot said laughingly; 'some inconvenient young gentleman or other will, I have no doubt, take good care of that; but as long as you like to stay with us.'

Olivia at first quite declined the proposition. 'Thank you,' she had said, 'Isabella. It is a most kind proposal. But I do not wish to be dependent on any one while I can earn my living like an honest woman.'

‘My dear child,’ Mrs. Heriot said with rough good nature, ‘you will earn your living just as honestly with us as at your uncle’s, with those horrid little brats of cousins ; none the less honestly because a hundred times more pleasantly. I mean to make you work like a slave—to write my notes, to amuse my guests, to watch over Antinous and his nurse, to make tea for me ; to help me, in fact, in getting through life, which at present is more than I can accomplish.’

‘In fact,’ said Olivia, ‘I am to be a maid-of-all-work, am I not ?’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs. Heriot, ‘a maid-of-all-work of the ornamental order ; and no bad trade either. You will observe that I am taking you without a character from your last place ; you ought to be very much obliged to me. But, seriously, Olivia, I shall be very much obliged to *you* if you will come, and the arrangement is, you must see, not a disadvantageous one for you. You

don't want, I suppose, to vegetate all your life in a dingy provincial town, and grow up an old maid, or escape from that fate by marrying a curate or a schoolmaster——'

'Or an ogre!' cried Olivia with a shudder, recalling her experiences with her cousin. 'Dreadful destiny!'

'Yes,' said her cousin, to whom Olivia had already related this disagreeable episode in her personal history; 'they would all be ogres, Olivia; it would be a hateful existence. You are destined for better things. I will lead you to your destiny. Behold your deliverer!'

Olivia felt her cousin's arguments to be unanswerable. The prospect of deliverance was alluring. The return to bondage in her uncle's house loomed black in the future, rich with horrid possibilities. She dreaded her dull, uncongenial relations, her unwelcome tasks, the likelihood of renewed love-making. Her mission was not, she felt surer than

ever, to supplement the defects of her cousins' education. She felt full of capacity in a hundred different directions. She was stirred by ambition. She felt a vague longing for pleasure, for happiness, for success. Mrs. Heriot—a practical adept in the art of getting people to let her have her way—pressed her point with good-natured insistence. After a little more hesitation Olivia accepted her cousin's invitation.

CHAPTER XXV

A WINTER IN LONDON

‘ Ere one moment flitted, fast was he,
Fond bondslave to the beauty evermore,
For life, for death, for Heaven, for Hell her own ;
Philosophy, bewail thy fate ! Adieu,
Youth realistic and illusion-proof ! ’

THE winter is to many Londoners a genial period. It blossoms with sociability, and bears a bountiful crop of little dinners. The evenings are long, and give even the busiest a sense of leisure. The strong tide of society which rushed, rude and violent, through the summer months, flows with a gentle current. Everybody has been somewhere and has acquired a new tinge of brightness from the experiences of an autumn

tour. There has been an interval in the intercourse, even of those whose haunts lie closest to each other, which gives a welcome aroma of freshness to a meeting. The *raconteur* has evolved a new crop of stories, the philosopher a fresh theory of the universe, the professional beauty an unimagined costume. One man has annexed a virgin island, another has invented a new religion. Human society, flaccid from the monotonous labours of the season, responds gratefully to the tonic of freshly culled gossip and newly conceived ideas.

The effect is heightened by the circumstance that the English climate has reached its climax of uncompromising badness. A London November will stand no nonsense from people who make an impertinent pretence of enjoying it, or who apologise for it as healthy. It will contribute neither to enjoyment nor to health. Nothing pleasant is to be had anywhere beyond those comfort-

able precincts which human art has fortified against an outside world of fog, mud, and drizzle. But then the artificial delights of home are all the more delightful for the contrast they offer to Nature's rugged mood.

So Olivia, on returning in the late autumn with the Heriots, found that, despite east winds, seas of mud, and occasional intervals of Egyptian darkness, life was anything but dull. She was getting on capitally with her cousins. The autumn had been a success. Existence with Mrs. Heriot—if somewhat below the ideal of existence—was easy, cheerful, comfortable; pleasant enough, at any rate, to quiet any restless promptings to a move. The idea of a return to her uncle's house was more than ever inconceivable. Olivia was young and happy, despite some sad moments, when she contrasted her present surroundings with happier hours with her father or the choicer pleasures of

Lady Heriot's society. These were better than anything now within her reach. They belonged to a vanished world, which it was sweet to dream of, to cherish in loving, pious reminiscence. Olivia herself had passed into a new phase of existence ; she had enlarged her horizon ; she was stirred by new tastes, impulses, aspirations. But her old self and her old inclinations were still alive, and now and again forced themselves to light in unexpected outbursts of waywardness. 'You must not be surprised,' she once said to her cousin, 'at anything I do. I have something of the Bohemian in me, and something of the Puritan. You will see I shall break loose some day and go back to my Bohemianism. You will never tame me into a young lady of fashion.'

Despite her regrets of Bohemianism, Olivia took kindly to her new home and her new life. She fully verified all Mrs. Heriot's predictions as to her aptitude for

society, and the impression she would make on the sensibility of mankind. Mankind and womankind were equally impressed. Her unstudied attitudes had a refined beauty of their own, all the more striking for its complete unconsciousness. Her face, the faithful mirror of each passing mood—mirth, pathos, enthusiasm, interest—was exquisite in all. Everybody wanted to talk to her; everybody was interested in her: all admired. Mrs. Heriot was charmed at the pronounced success of her experiment; and already let her fancy wander in happy exultancy down a long vista of delightful possibilities.

Parliament was not sitting, and De Renzi had gone for a holiday to Vienna. Soon after Christmas he returned. Olivia, coming down into the drawing-room late one afternoon, found him established by Mrs. Heriot's tea-table, and enjoying the privileges of a confidential chat. The conversation broke off abruptly as she entered, in a manner that

suggested to Olivia that the talk had been about herself.

‘I am delighted,’ De Renzi said, ‘to hear that you have come to London for something more than a visit—to tantalise and disappear as you did last season. Mrs. Heriot has been telling me. It is one of her most brilliant ideas. You will enjoy society, I think; and society, I am positive, will enjoy you.’

‘My cousin has been telling me,’ Mrs. Heriot said, ‘that she is a Bohemian and will never be tamed into liking society.’

‘Happy Bohemia!’ cried De Renzi. ‘The most charming country in Europe and the most necessary! As for society, how can any one profess to like it? Miss Hillyard and I are quite agreed on that and everything. We settled our agreement at the Pines last Christmas.’

‘I fancied that we had disagreed,’ said Olivia.

‘You have forgotten,’ answered De Renzi, ‘you converted me.’

‘What an achievement!’ said Mrs. Heriot. ‘I did not know that you were convertible—by woman’s arguments, at any rate.’

‘Well,’ said De Renzi, ‘I was converted. The only society that is worth having is the society of friends whom one sincerely admires. That is why I am so fond of coming here.’

‘It is very nice of you to come so soon,’ said Mrs. Heriot.

‘You must let me come often,’ said De Renzi. ‘These winter evenings were made expressly for society in my sense of the word—in *our* sense of it. They are worth all your summer sunsets. The muffin boy’s bell is the Londoner’s nightingale, and how full of poetry! I met one as I came here.’

‘That reminds me,’ said Mrs. Valentine, ‘we have got a splendid muffin to-day. You must try it.’

De Renzi soon justified his definition of society. He constantly made his appearance at tea-time. He was always available for dinner—sometimes when the Heriots were alone, sometimes on state occasions, sometimes when one or two familiar guests added merriment without formality to an uncere-
monious repast. In each and all he was a valuable addition. He gave a tone ; he made an impression ; he flashed with joyous arrogance. He shot his bolts of satire with a careless hand ; his colleagues, his superiors, his opponents, each in turn were held up in an absurd light for the amusement of his neighbour or the table as the chance might be.

As before in London and at the Pines, Olivia found his presence a marked addition to the agreeableness of existence. He was always kind, always devising kindnesses. It is no inconsiderable kindness to amuse one, and De Renzi was always amusing. Olivia

enjoyed his society all the more that it could be enjoyed in safety. He was the sort of companion for whom just now she felt inclined. A companion who was everything rather than sentimental. She was in no mood for sentiment, or the sentimental aspects of life. She had turned away from them, or rather, they seemed to have faded out of her existence. All that was most dear and sacred to her seemed gone. Her father and Lady Heriot, the two main influences of her earlier life, could influence no more except by the spells of remembrance which grew weaker day by day. Her home and her home life had become a dream of the past.

The happy days at Huntsham were gone for ever; no such days could come again. And Jack Heriot! It was all very well for Lady Heriot to preach that Jack and Olivia could never be anything but friends—that the attempt to be anything more could lead

only to disappointment, disaster. It was true, Olivia could not but admit ; but it was a bitter truth. She had bowed to the stern decree of fate, of what people called duty ; she admitted it as inevitable ; she had given up her girlish dream. The sacrifice had been made ; but it had cost her more than she had expected. She had renounced the idea of Jack as a lover ; but it is one thing to renounce an idea, another to forget it. Olivia had achieved the renunciation, but not all her fortitude would save her, now and then, from a sharp pang of regret. She was facing the world now in some bitterness of spirit. The love which might—which, in a properly constituted world, would—have been hers was forbidden. She felt disinclined for any other. Some day she would have to marry. So Mrs. Heriot preached to her ; so others practised. It would befall her as other girls ; it was the common lot. But it would be a marriage—such as are contracted

every day—of expediency, not of romance ; it would free her from dependence on Mrs. Heriot, on whom she could not indefinitely depend. It would be expected of her—the obvious, indeed the only way of disposing of herself. It would be her fate. Naturally she did not feel in the least hurry for it to befall her.

Olivia was, however, completely in the dark about De Renzi. He was, in truth, deeply impressed. He was touched ; he knew now that he had never been touched before. Olivia had surprised him into an unaccustomed mood. He had seen women whose personal beauty took the world by storm ; women whose conversation seemed a blaze of wit ; gifted women, with whom culture and experience had carried the natural gift of fascination to finished lengths of completeness. He had felt their power, but none had ever touched his heart. Was it certain that he had one ? The world around

him, blindly judging from his cynical language, opined that he had not. De Renzi had sometimes doubted; but he doubted no more. People often become aware of their organs when they begin to hurt them through disease. In this way De Renzi now learnt for the first time that he had a heart, by a decided heartache. He was the cynic no more. Incredible as it seemed to himself, incredible as it would appear to society—he was in love.

Being in love, choosing to marry for love, not for any of the solid advantages which a judiciously selected marriage brings, was not a contingency for which the family philosophy of the De Renzis had hitherto had any occasion to provide. It had not occurred, even in thought, to any of them. Sir Raphael, head of the clan, had married a million—the parent of future millions. His wife, besides some solid masses of invested wealth, opened the door, through

her connections, to various fresh sources of gold. The two married daughters had made distinguished rather than opulent alliances; but the splendour paid. Claude's *rôle* in life had, from the first, been understood. He was to marry a million if he wished to be a millionaire; and he had every chance of doing so. His father would do all that a good father should in supplying his necessities meanwhile and giving him a prolonged series of splendid opportunities. Claude de Renzi might enjoy a golden youth for as long as he pleased, always, of course, construing 'long' with an eye to reasonable people's ideas of length. He was welcome to enjoy his opportunities of splendour on a lavish scale. He was to look about him, to view the world from its vantage posts of wealth and influence. He need grudge himself nothing. He might quaff the rich sparkling cup of pleasure; but he was to remember that business is,

after all, the end of life. He was to turn his opportunities to good account; he was to settle down, at last, to a fortune — English, American, or what he pleased, so long as it was huge; and that ‘at last,’ De Renzi’s father had more than once hinted to him, was not to be too long delayed.

De Renzi had accepted his *rôle*, as far at least as leading an extravagant and pleasurable existence was concerned. He was on the best of terms with a variety of women. He had played round more than one delicious bait; he had looked wistfully at several golden opportunities; but the opportunities had passed unused. It had never seemed certain that the final moment for action had arrived, that something still better might not be had.

Sir Raphael was a man of infinite capacity for waiting. He never hurried. He never wished those in whom he was

concerned to hurry. So Claude had been allowed to take his time, and, year after year, had deferred the decisive crisis of his life.

Now a mood of quite another order had befallen him, a mood which would involve the abandonment of a life-long policy, of the family traditions, of the tacit bargain between his father and himself.

He loved this penniless girl in a way in which love had never revealed itself to him before—a violent, passionate, reckless vehemence, that chafed wildly at every check, that banished the habitual feeling of self-possession, calmness, the cold-blooded faculty of managing mankind. Olivia, it was certain, was adorable. De Renzi's feelings quickened to a passion of enthusiasm when it became apparent that she was by no means anxious to be adored.

CHAPTER XXVI

JACK MAKES THE RUNNING

‘What say you to the lady? Love is not love
When it is mingled with respects that stand
Aloof from the entire point. Will you have her?
She is herself a dowry.’

ISABELLA HERIOT, calmly surveying the situation and taking observations on her domestic chart, noted accurately how matters stood, and had a shrewd suspicion of De Renzi's feelings and of the further measures which were necessary to bring about a happy *dénouement*. Love is an affair full of anxious fear, not only to the immediate subjects of the passion, but to those who stand by and watch the conflicting currents of emotion and interest, and the perilous journey of

desirable projects to successful accomplishment. It was a perilous passage indeed which Mrs. Heriot had now to watch, and, if possible, to influence. De Renzi was certainly impressed with a strong sense of Olivia's delightfulness. If his feelings only had to be reckoned with, no difficulty need be anticipated. He would certainly travel loyally in the path which affection traced for him. But strong counter-influences, social and domestic, Mrs. Heriot surmised, would be brought to bear. How would De Renzi behave under these influences? Was he of the sturdy stuff which opposition only kindles to a warmer mood and a more determined resolve? Or would he succumb? Would he falter? Would he let this prize, which took his fancy so much just now, slip from his grasp when he found it was not to be had without a struggle, without painful contest? The fish was hooked, firmly hooked, but it was not landed, and

there is always some room for anxiety as to how the hooked fish will behave. He may succeed in breaking frantically away; he may get under a rock and sulk; he may maintain a long and desperate struggle and yield only from exhaustion. How was De Renzi going to behave? Momentous problem, and defying solution by feminine ingenuity! Victory was priceless; but was victory to be achieved? The hostile forces were formidable in numbers, equipment, and tactics. The crisis was acute—no reinforcement could be spared. In what direction could Mrs. Heriot look for reinforcement or alliance?

An alliance presented itself from a quarter—*quâ minime reris*—in the person the least disposed of any one in the world to abet a project of Mrs. Heriot's. It was one of the fortunate accidents which combined to give her a comforting assurance that she was born under a lucky star. The new ally was no other than Jack Heriot. He

had not been near his uncle and aunt for ages. He shared his father's wrath with the one, his antipathy to the other. Not even the attraction of meeting Olivia would tempt him from his unswerving hostility. He nursed his resentment even against Olivia. She was in the enemy's camp. She was an enemy. It was inevitable. That she should be so was only one more instance of the hopelessly perverse misarrangement of human affairs. It was, perhaps, just as well, prudence whispered. Yes ; but none the less grievous to endure. She would be spoilt, as so many women are ; probably she was spoilt already. All dreams of happiness, in which she figured as chief personage—and what other dreams were possible ? must be renounced. So Jack Heriot's soul was darkened by an angry mood. 'To be wroth with one we love doth work like madness in the brain.' Jack was very wroth and very much in love.

Olivia, too, cherished some resentment. It was discourteous, unkind, cruel of Jack to banish himself from the house where, he knew, such a friend as she was could be found, when he knew that she was living amongst comparative strangers, in need, as he might be sure, of a friend's companionship. Love, indeed, between them was impossible ; its impossibility had been tacitly agreed upon. It was not to be ; so the Fates had decreed ; but friendship, kindness, the common courtesies of life, the ties of old recollection, of early sympathies, of childhood's joys and sorrows shared together—who had obliged Jack to turn his back on these ? Who had asked him to shut himself off from his uncle and aunt, and thus from the person who formed one of their household ? Mrs. Heriot had taken an opportunity of expressing her own views as to Jack, and of ascertaining Olivia's. Jack, she observed, was behaving like his

father's son, with irrational and obstinate rudeness and ingratitude. His uncle had done all that he could for him; had found him an excellent business, which would by this time have been making him a rich man. Jack's way of receiving his uncle's kindness had been truly Heriotic—stupid rejection, an insolent behaviour ever since—a determination to have nothing to do with the only practicable scheme for his advancement—with the only people in the world who were willing and able to help him. 'He prefers, I suppose,' Isabella said, 'to help himself in the simplest way he can—the only way he can—he is to marry money.'

'I know,' Olivia had answered with some asperity. 'Lady Eugenia had told me all about it. It is a pity, is it not, that men should have to do it? I do not envy him the necessity.'

'My dear child,' said Mrs. Heriot with emphasis, 'your necessity is just the same;

you must provide for yourself, if you please. I shall marry you in good time to a fortune. You will have to submit. If you are wise you will submit with a good grace.'

At these moments Olivia looked like anything rather than submission. 'We will not quarrel about that, Isabella,' she had said, 'till the time comes. Please remember that your fortune must be young, beautiful, charming—adorable, in fact—or I will not look at him; and please put him off as long as possible. I can bear the idea of him at a distance; but at present I should break into rebellion the first moment he came near me. My heart is hardening. In another two seasons I shall be sufficiently petrified. As to Jack Heriot, I repeat my lamentation. He belongs to my romantic past. He is charming; it is a pity that he has to go fortune-hunting. If he were as charming as he seems I should think he would not do it. Perhaps he will not, after all.'

‘But he certainly must and will,’ said Mrs. Heriot, ‘unless he wants to repeat his father’s dismal existence, and I suspect that he has seen enough of that. But you speak warmly. You liked him, did you not?’

‘I did,’ said Olivia. ‘We were great friends as children, and childish affectionate ; it was a nursery flirtation ; it is all at an end. We are discreet young people, and have forgotten each other as completely as our wisest friends could wish. He has taken good care not to revive inconvenient recollections, has he not?’

Such being the mood of the several parties concerned, it was a matter of general embarrassment when one evening, when Mrs. Heriot and Olivia had escaped from a hot drive to take refuge under the trees in the park, Jack suddenly came upon them—too suddenly to admit of retreat on either side. Escape was impossible. In another instant Jack’s desire to escape was gone.

One look was enough to tell him that remembrance had drawn but a feeble, inadequate picture of Olivia's charms. She was more fresh, more beautiful, more radiant, more altogether exquisite than he had fancied in his dreams about her. It was more than human stoicism could achieve to turn away, graceless and unbending, from so delightful an opportunity, so enchanting a companion. What face was there in all that crowd of pretty women—among all the pretty women that Jack's incursions into polite society had revealed to him—that could compare with this one? After a few bungling sentences of hesitation, Jack consented to be detained. Olivia flushed with pleasure and surprise. 'We have not seen you for an age,' said Mrs. Heriot with cordiality. 'Where have you been hiding, Jack, and why do you never come to see us? Come and sit by us now, and make your excuses if you can.'

Jack had no excuses to offer ; he took an empty chair that was next to Olivia's. Mrs. Valentine was excessively gracious, quite ignored Jack's past defaults and unamiable demeanour, and talked with so much good nature that Jack, despite his treasured grievances, his stern resolutions, could not, without absolute savagery, refuse to be good natured. The fact was that Mrs. Heriot had made up her mind that the moment had arrived when Jack might be of use. Claude de Renzi's ardour needed a little stimulant ; and what stimulant more effective than the presence of a rival ? We admire a lovely flower—we praise its delicate hues, its exquisite fragrance, and are content to admire it on its stalk ; but when another's hand is stretched to pick it our admiration becomes active, practical ; we want to pick it for ourselves. De Renzi had now admired the flower long enough ; a rival was needed. Jack, moreover, had the advantage of being

a dummy rival. Isabella knew that he had promised his father that there should be no love-passages between Olivia and himself. Jack's word was his bond. He might, accordingly, be safely allowed to do a little innocent love-making by way of a hint to De Renzi that lovely flowers are intended not only to be admired but to be picked. So Mrs. Heriot was affability itself. It was agreeable to her to reflect, while she was thawing the ice of her nephew's refractory mood, that De Renzi had arranged to join them in the park that evening, and in a few minutes would be on the spot to receive the first instalment of the infection which Mrs. Heriot considered proper for his case.

De Renzi presently made his appearance, greeted the two ladies, Jack observed, with an air which said that such meetings were of frequent occurrence, and atoned by a friendly recognition for his first look of surprise at finding Jack with them. He subsided at

once into the chair which Mrs. Valentine had for some time past been defending on his behalf against sundry attempts at invasion. But it was in vain that Mrs. Heriot used her every art to make conversation flow. Four people seated in a row may, in some circumstances, enjoy themselves ; but if they are at cross purposes, and each is inspired by a different aim, they are likely to make each other uncomfortable. On the present occasion the party was anything but harmonious. De Renzi was secretly indignant at his seat by Olivia being occupied. Jack was haunted by the reflection that he was not showing the obduracy which he ought ; Olivia was constrained, embarrassed, and grieved at heart. Jack was not being so kind and sympathetic as he ought—as she had expected that he would be. He had neglected her for months ; he seemed now not especially delighted to have met her. De Renzi, she knew, had come by appointment to meet

them, and would be vexed not to have them to himself. He was doing his best to be agreeable to Mrs. Heriot, to them all ; but it was a poor attempt. How different from his merry mood when there was no one with them but himself, or when he brought with him some congenial spirit who abetted his efforts to keep her cousin and herself well amused!

Mrs. Heriot, who was an adroit tactician and keenly sensitive to her own and her neighbour's discomfort, lost no time in effecting a diversion. 'It is growing cooler,' she said; 'suppose we go for a stroll. You shall lead the way, Jack. Come, Mr. de Renzi.'

'Jack Heriot!' said De Renzi, as soon as he and Mrs. Valentine dropped far enough behind for a separate conversation. 'I had forgotten his existence. I knew him at Oxford, when we used to go hunting together. An excellent rider! Does he live in Lon-

don? I never meet him anywhere. Do you often see him?’

‘He is Valentine’s nephew,’ said Mrs. Heriot, evading her companion’s inquiry, ‘and heir-apparent of the Heriot dynasty. He is revolutionary and philanthropical, and worships art. As an artist in search of the picturesque he is naturally devoted to my cousin. It is an old devotion.’

‘How interesting!’ said De Renzi in a low tone of nonchalance; ‘and the devotion is mutual, no doubt?’

‘How can I tell?’ said Mrs. Heriot; ‘it might easily become so. You see how charming they both are. Olivia is highly impressible, and Jack Heriot is said to be impressive. But the impressions that young people mutually make and receive are beyond calculation—beyond *my* powers of calculation, at any rate.’

De Renzi looked suddenly round at Mrs. Heriot and scanned her, as though endeav-

ouring to divine her real meaning. For the moment it eluded him. Was Mrs. Heriot telling the simple truth? Was she intending to give him a hint of the existence of a dangerous rival? Did she wish to prick his flagging purpose? For once De Renzi was bewildered. 'Such things are incalculable, of course,' he said; 'it was impertinent of me to ask; my excuse must be that Miss Hilliard always interests me immensely.'

'Does she?' said Mrs. Heriot. 'Well, I sympathise with you. I think her the most interesting girl I have ever known.'

Meanwhile matters were not going smoothly with Jack and Olivia. Their moods were out of tune. To her, life wore its brightest, most attractive, most caressing look. The flowing cup of its pleasures was at her lips. She drank, and drank again, charmed with the intoxicating draught. She was too young, too inexperienced, too excited to gauge the true worth of a hundred pleasant

objects tendered for her delight—a hundred flattering speeches, flattering acts. For the world just now was being very kind to Olivia, and Olivia in return was grateful to the world, and thought it much maligned. She was in no mood for Jack's tirades against society, society which was so gracious, so kindly, so enjoyable.

Jack, on the other hand, was in a rage with himself, with his lot, with destiny, with the hopeless unattainability of the sweet things of life. His heart was aching for the sweet young creature beside him. He felt a bitterness at the gay, prosperous, comfortable, beautifully dressed, pleasure-seeking, chattering world around him. All spoke of ease, pleasure, luxury, happiness. Why was there none for him? Why was he denied the woman he loved? Why was nature to be trampled on? What were these rules of prudence which crushed young loves, young hearts; which ignored every sentiment of

nature? Why could he not take this beautiful woman by the hand, with a loving compulsion lead her away from the crowd, and breathe his tale of passion, of love, and claim her as his own? That would be the right thing, the natural, the happy thing for all concerned. Why was it impossible? Why was not Jack to live his life, to taste the sweet cup of happiness, of love, as well as others? What right had his father to exact such a promise? What right had life to make such a promise necessary? So Jack was in an angry, heart-sore, rebellious mood, half desperate with vexation, ready to be vexed anew. 'I should have been to see you before,' he said, 'but——'

'But what?' said Olivia. 'I thought it so unkind.'

'Unkind!' cried Jack; 'unkind from me to you! I have been away at Rome studying my profession and learning to become a Bohemian.'

‘And I,’ said Olivia, ‘am being cured of my Bohemianism. I am being educated, I believe, into a young woman of fashion.’

‘So I see,’ said Jack. ‘You do credit to your education.’

There was something in Jack’s tone that seemed rude, bitter, and unlike himself.

‘What do you mean?’ Olivia asked, with something of a reproachful tone. ‘Am I changed?’

‘Yes,’ said Jack; ‘changed into an extremely smart young lady. My excellent aunt is a proficient in smartness. That is why I love her so.’

‘Why do you talk like that?’ said Olivia. ‘Perhaps it is *you* who are changed.’

‘Yes,’ said Jack, ‘I am changed. I am a working man now—an artist, a toiler, a socialist, one of the masses. I have no right to be here among all you smart people. They put me in prison last year for defending one of my fellow-workmen against a

policeman. You see I am quite disreputable. You ought not to walk with me. When your education is completed, you will not.'

'You know that I will!' cried Olivia in indignation. 'You are changed indeed if you can believe it of me. I am your friend, your old friend——'

'Ah, but,' said Jack, 'old friends make room for new. De Renzi, I suppose, is often with you?'

'He is,' said Olivia with dignity. 'He is a great friend of my cousin's. He often comes.'

'Ah,' said Jack with intention.

Olivia thought that her companion was behaving odiously. Had he grown odious? It was a relief when at the end of the row they found the carriage awaiting them.

'Shall we drop you at the House, Mr. de Renzi?' Mrs. Heriot said. 'Good-bye, Jack; and come and see us soon.'

Olivia gave him her hand without a word. She was wounded, vexed, disappointed. De Renzi and the two ladies drove away, talking and laughing gaily.

Poor Jack prolonged a solitary stroll. The world was very dark to him.

That evening Mrs. Heriot took Olivia to a ball. De Renzi arrived late, and soon made his way to them. He found Olivia in the full swing of girlish enjoyment—excited, radiant, more beautiful than ever. She was in great request. She was pledged for a hopelessly long list of dances. For the rest of the evening she was unattainable. De Renzi could only look and silently admire. Critical eyes bent searchingly upon her could discern nothing to disparage; admiring eyes followed her as she moved about, a dream of brightness, of grace, of gaiety. De Renzi stood by Mrs. Heriot and watched the scene. He saw that in a room full of lovely women there was no loveliness like hers—so un-

studied, so refined, so perfect—no woman of whom a man might feel prouder to be the chosen worshipper. The world was at her feet, and she moved like a young goddess in more than human perfection, the ideal of triumphant loveliness. ‘Your cousin is looking beautiful to-night,’ he said, ‘more charming than ever.’

‘So people seem to think,’ said Mrs. Heriot.

De Renzi was silent for some seconds—momentous seconds, for in them the die was cast: his fate was sealed. A sudden pang of jealousy shot burning into his soul. Was this exquisite creature to escape him? Was another hand to secure this peerless prize? De Renzi was betrayed into a tremendous indiscretion. He turned suddenly to Mrs. Heriot. ‘Am I too late?’ he asked.

His companion was busy with a disordered flower in her bouquet. She con-

tinued leisurely to arrange it to her taste. At last she looked up and met De Renzi's eyes awaiting her reply.

‘No,’ she said ; ‘but I should imagine that you have no time to lose.’

CHAPTER XXVII

THE DIE IS CAST

‘ She’s beautiful, and therefore to be wooed ;
She is a woman, therefore to be won.’

ISABELLA HERIOT’S philosophy of life enabled her to explain almost everything, but Olivia’s hesitation in accepting De Renzi’s proposal appeared to her absolutely inexplicable. Such an offer seemed the crowning summit of human felicity. What greater bliss could a girl, in her wildest dream of happiness, desire? No amount of perverseness short of fatuity could account for an instant’s reluctance to close with so splendid a chance. Wealth and position, such as Claude de Renzi would confer on his wife, had often to

be purchased by a sacrifice of taste and sentiment. There were some owners of splendid names or colossal fortunes whom no girl out of Bedlam could refuse, but yet whose physical exterior or mental qualities were such as could hardly be accepted without an effort. In some cases the effort hardly fell short of heroism. There were splendid marriages where it was in vain to pretend that a romantic girl could find in the bridegroom the lawful master of her heart. There were always girls with nerve enough to undertake such husbands if they got the chance. Some people might not envy their lot. But in Claude de Renzi's case there were none of these drawbacks. He was conspicuously agreeable. He was the idol of several admiring circles ; he was the particular friend of many ladies whose friendship was a rare distinction ; he was a delightful companion ; his good looks were undeniable ; he was the 'glass of fashion and the mould of

form—the observed of all observers.’ On what ground was it conceivable that Olivia should hesitate in accepting this splendid aggregate of perfections?

Yet Olivia showed a strange hesitation. She came in great perturbation to tell her cousin about her interview with her lover. She had given no answer to De Renzi’s vehement protest of attachment, except that she was quite unprepared for it.

‘Unprepared!’ cried her cousin in astonishment. ‘How could you possibly be that? Have you not known for months past that he has been making love to you, assiduous love?’

‘No, indeed,’ said Olivia; ‘I have not; and, what is more, I do not consider that he has. He has amused me, been kind to me, excessively kind and good natured—but love-making! No, I cannot recall any.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Mrs. Valentine, ‘you do not know what it is.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Olivia, in an unconvinced tone; ‘anyhow, he has made it now. He loves me. What am I to do?’

‘Do?’ said Mrs. Valentine, vainly endeavouring to conceal her contempt for such irrational hesitation. ‘Love him back in return, of course, as you do, Olivia; you know that you do, surely.’

‘No,’ said Olivia, ‘I do not know it; I wish I did. I am taken by surprise. The offer has come too soon, Isabella; I am too young. I told you the truth the other day. I do not wish to marry yet. I cannot. I do not like the idea. Ask him to let the subject drop. Let us be as we were, good friends. Please, Isabella, do this for me.’

Mrs. Heriot’s eyes had at times a cold, gray, steely look, which was the reverse of tender. She seemed now to Olivia the incarnation of hard-heartedness. Her face was pale with excitement, with scorn, with

anger. Her thin bloodless lips seemed to quiver with lightning-flashes. Yet instinct warned Mrs. Heriot to be self-restrained, to be gentle. A single false step, a single wrong expression, might induce a catastrophe. She assumed a kinder air. 'You are unnerved Olivia,' she said; 'you are not yourself. You hardly know your own feelings, believe me; how should you? But look into your heart: remember all that has passed, the innumerable kindnesses which Mr. de Renzi has offered and which you have accepted; the open homage he has paid you and which you assuredly have not disliked. Will you now turn round and proclaim to the world that you were amusing yourself merely, that you were trifling, that Mr. de Renzi was being befooled by a coquette? Think twice before you do so grievous a wrong to a man that loves you as he does, before you insult him and disgrace yourself.'

‘Disgrace myself!’ exclaimed Olivia, turning pale. ‘What have I done?’

‘You have encouraged him in every possible way,’ said Mrs. Valentine with emphasis; ‘he has declared himself. What motive can he have but a generous and disinterested attachment? If you reject him you will have been behaving infamously. You always seemed the best of friends.’

‘Friends,’ said Olivia; ‘yes, but marriage; it is too soon, too near! I do not seem to know anything about him.’

‘What is it that you want to know and do not?’ objected her companion. ‘We know everything about him, his position, his family, his prospects, his splendid success. No man in London is more admired or in more request, and he deserves it. You know that he is an old friend of mine.’

‘Yes,’ said Olivia, ‘and that is why I come to you for help. I am in dire need of help, Isabella. I like him, of course. How

could I not? I admire him; he attracts me, impresses me, dazzles me. He is good-nature itself. But his proposal frightened me, inspired me with a strange reluctance, a sort of terror. Why is it?’

‘Why?’ cried Mrs. Heriot; ‘because you are a little innocent, and have never had a man make love to you before.’

‘I am in the dark,’ said Olivia. ‘He has shown nothing of his real self. I know nothing of him, nor has being with him helped me to know him. What is he, Isabella? To me he is still a mystery, and I am not fond of the mysterious.’

‘There is no mystery about him,’ Mrs. Valentine said, ‘but one which he will be ready enough to explain—his affection for yourself.’

Olivia passed some hours of agitation—self-searching, doubt, hope, fear, perplexity, accesses of heroism, lapses into abject cowardice. She had reduced herself to

something like prostration when De Renzi came in the evening to claim another interview and hear her reply. The day's uncertainty had wrought him to an impetuous mood. Olivia's hesitation made him more confident about himself than ever. She was dreadfully frightened, excited, never more bewitchingly beautiful. De Renzi was genuinely affectionate, vehement, extravagant, all that a lover should be. He breathed his passion, his devotion, in no faltering tones. He overpowered objections with enthusiasm, with joyous hopeful confidence, with tenderness. He was earnest, impassioned. Resistance seemed less and less reasonable, less possible. The inflammable materials of Olivia's nature began to catch the flame.

It is delightful to be loved; De Renzi did all that a lover could to enhance the delightfulness. He had always overpowered her; how was she not to be overpowered

now ? how was she to resist this strong will, this imperative demand, this masterful nature, that claimed her for his own ?

She began to waver ; the victorious force pressed hard on her retreat, seized every vantage - ground, carried point after point. At last the day was won.

‘ You are rash,’ Olivia said. ‘ Whatever I say now, you must remember that I was not sure this morning.’

‘ But I was sure then and I am sure now,’ said De Renzi ; ‘ sure enough for both of us.’

‘ Then,’ said Olivia, giving him her hand, ‘ I will be sure too.’

CHAPTER XXVIII

YOUNG LOVE IN DIFFICULTIES

*‘Geta loq. Ille indotatam virginem atque ignobilem
Daret illi ? Nunquam faceret.’*

DE RENZI was delighted with his wooing, with a new sensation, a new experience. He was delighted with Olivia. She had comported herself through the encounter with a dignity and nobleness which enhanced her worth a thousand times. Her unaffected surprise at his proposal, her hesitation in accepting it, the reluctance that had struggled long and had to be mastered, as it were, sword in hand—all these sent her up enormously in her lover’s scale of feminine excellence, made love’s assurance doubly

sure, convinced him, more cogently than ever, that his worship was being paid at a deserving shrine. Everything in Olivia was, in fact, adorable—the loftiness of soul, the courageous spirit, the quick intelligence, not less than the exquisite form in which all these spiritual treasures were enshrined. De Renzi experienced a thrill of admiration such as he had never felt before. Olivia, he was certain, was incomparable. He knew it; the world would acknowledge it. That she should be his prize was but in that eternal order of things which had decreed that his path should run from one glittering summit to another in the flowery uplands of success.

Great victories are costly. The cost of this would, De Renzi knew, be serious. There would be a bad quarter of an hour with his father. He had reckoned on this, but it looked less pleasant as the moment of collision approached. Sir Raphael was self-

willed, unconciliatory, vindictive. He could be very nasty to those who disappointed his hopes or crossed his will. He would, De Renzi knew, be very nasty to him about his marriage. Sir Raphael had quite other schemes in his mind for his son's advancement in life. Claude had known of these schemes; had, on the strength of them, enjoyed a long youth of pleasure; had been for several years fluttering about London drawing-rooms, when, otherwise, he might have been buried among ledgers, invoices, and bills of lading in a counting-house at Odessa or Chicago. He had been treated—as Sir Raphael liked to treat those who transacted business with him, so long as they did what he wished—with generous profusion. No member of London's golden youth had had his gold more thickly laid on or more abundantly renewed. The time had now arrived for Claude de Renzi to fulfil his part of the bargain. Several eligible

alliances had been suggested which would have satisfied the father, which could not reasonably dissatisfy the son. Claude, however, had hesitated in fulfilling his duty, was now about to make its fulfilment impossible. He would have got the best of the bargain. Sir Raphael seldom invested in hatred : it is not a paying investment. He could, when expedient, forgive and forget ; but the man who got the better of him in a bargain was unforgivable. Sir Raphael hated such a man, and would crush him remorselessly on the first opportunity. Claude de Renzi had frequently seen his father crush people. He felt no desire to experience the process ; yet if his father chose, how easily might the husband of a penniless girl be crushed !

The interview proved worse than De Renzi had depicted it in anticipation. Sir Raphael's very demeanour—unimpassioned, cynical, business-like—seemed to damn his son's case before he opened it. As well

hope to melt Mephistopheles with a tale of tender hearts and youthful innocence. As the disclosure proceeded Sir Raphael looked at his son, at first with surprise, then with real amusement. 'Well,' he said, as Claude's story came to a close, 'you want me to forbid it, of course. I do so in the most peremptory manner, with the most uncompromising severity. You are to blame, my dear Claude; very much to blame. You are excessively unprincipled. I am much displeased. I forbid you, on pain of my eternal displeasure, to have a word more to say to the young woman. Write and tell her so at once, and say how sorry you are. Will that get you out of the scrape? or shall I send you off on an important negotiation to the Antipodes? I will do so with pleasure. When would you like to go?'

'You misunderstand me,' said De Renzi. 'I am in earnest. It is not an escape from an entanglement that I am seeking, but your

consent to a marriage which is essential to my happiness. The young lady——’

‘Is a paragon, of course,’ said his father. ‘They always are. Don’t trouble yourself, Claude, or waste my time and your own in describing her charms; I can imagine them. Still less try to persuade me to help you in a boy’s folly—I don’t wish to be rude to you; but a boy’s folly which I am surprised that you of all men should contemplate, and which, assuredly, I will never abet, will never allow.’

‘You are peremptory, sir,’ said Claude, ‘and not too polite. Miss Hillyard is a lovely and distinguished young lady. She moves in a brilliant circle, and adorns it. She is a connection of the Goldinghams, whom you know. She is Mrs. Heriot’s *protégée*, and is the greatest beauty of the day. I am determined to marry her. I beg you not to oppose an arrangement which is indispensable to my happiness, and

from which I cannot go back without dishonour.'

'Forgive me,' said his father. 'I am pressed for time; so, no doubt, are you. Do not let us waste any more. You cannot waste it more effectually than by talking about dishonour and trying to argue me into approving what I condemn as the height of un wisdom. You know my views, Claude, perfectly. They are unchangeable.'

'Then you forbid it, sir?' asked De Renzi.

'I have no right to do that,' said his father; 'nor do I. But if I do not hear of your engagement being broken off within the next twenty-four hours, I shall stop the allowance which assists you, perhaps has encouraged you, in a course of extravagances of which this is the climax; and I shall request you to take charge of some small interests of our House which require personal supervision at Buenos Ayres. The climate

is delightful; the voyage will brace you. My confidential clerk will give you all particulars better than I can. You will start on Tuesday. Good-morning.'

The De Renzis were not an affectionate family, nor was Claude de Renzi a habitual frequenter of his home, if, indeed, the frigidly gorgeous mansion in which Lady de Renzi dispensed her hospitalities deserved that comfortable appellation. Still the outbreak of hostilities between father and son was too serious an occurrence to be kept concealed. The consciousness of a domestic crisis pervaded the household with a sense of awe. Sir Raphael came home with the especial air of Mephistophelian politeness which bespoke to his wife and daughters a vengeful mood and a contemplated atrocity. Meanwhile Claude had explored the tender recesses of his mother's heart. Lady de Renzi sympathised completely with her husband's objections, but her opposition was more adroit. She objected

with *finesse*. Claude was the strong card of the family and must be played to the best advantage. It would be a misfortune to them all if his parliamentary career were interrupted, his excellent position in society abandoned, and a thousand ties that bound him, and through him his relations, to all the good things in life rudely snapped. His presence kept a brilliant, a successful De Renzi for ever before the world. He shed glory around him. His triumphs redounded to the family credit. To ruin him would be a lamentable waste of family strength. To send such a man to mingle with ship-agents and bill-brokers on the wrong side of the Atlantic would be to throw away a splendid chance. The old vulgar expedient of the self-willed father, who curses the refractory son and turns him out of the house, was as obsolete as the flint hatchets and megatheria of the infant world. Conciliation was essential. Claude was as determined as his father, as

long-sighted, as patient when patience was necessary for achievement, as unscrupulous when scruples stood in his way. He would never give in. If he succumbed, it would be after a struggle which would make victory expensive ; if he fell, he would drag down as much as possible with him in his fall. Peace must, Lady de Renzi perceived, be effected ; but the worst chance of reconciliation just then was to attempt it. Lady de Renzi had not been married thirty years to her husband for nothing. She watched the Mephistophelian smile—herald of tempestuous weather, watched and held her peace. All things come, she knew, to those who have learnt the precious art of how to wait, amongst other things, the opportunity of shaping her husband's conduct in the right direction. Lady de Renzi had learnt the invaluable rule that a wife who wishes to govern should never answer, still less argue, till a husband cools.

CHAPTER XXIX

STUCCO CARRIES THE DAY

‘Hast thou attempted greatness? Then go on.
Back-turning slackens resolution.’

FORTUNE who favours the brave is accustomed also to smile on the dexterous. It was now Mrs. Heriot’s lot to exemplify the close connection between good luck and dexterity. De Renzi had confided to her the opposition which the announcement of his marriage was provoking in his family circle, and the uncomfortable predicament in which his father’s peremptory declaration placed him. He showed a manly spirit of resistance. ‘Of course,’ he said, ‘I shall win the day. I always do. I feel no apprehension on that score, but the question is how to win it most

easily. The point in a family victory is, not the winning it, but the winning it with as little bloodshed as possible.'

'Perhaps I can help you to a bloodless victory,' said Mrs. Valentine; 'but please to remember that, so far as we are concerned, you are under no obligation to win at all. You have but to say the word. Olivia is greatly attached to you; a breach would, of course, grieve her: but if anything should lead to a change in your feelings, or your family difficulties should make it necessary to defy them, she would, I am certain, wish you to be free, or, rather, would insist on your being so.'

De Renzi broke out with a burst of passion. 'What do you take me for, Mrs. Heriot—fool or traitor? Do you think that I do not know my own mind, or that I will allow anything—least of all my father's opposition, which I regard as a mere impertinence—to interfere with my decision, my devotion, my

unwavering, unalterable devotion to Olivia? No; I have won her; it is the achievement of my life. I love her. I worship her. I have vowed to marry her, and, by Heaven, marry her I will, though all the fathers and mothers in Christendom are in arms to oppose it.'

'A good lover!' said Mrs. Heriot with cordiality. 'Would that all were as good. Well, now for my scheme of alliance.'

Thereupon Mrs. Heriot proceeded to inform De Renzi of certain matters which had been till then deeply buried in the breasts of a few individuals, immediately concerned, but in which her companion began at once to feel a vivid interest.

Mr. Goldingham's business had been growing from one stage of greatness to another till the glory and the burthen had become too much for a single family. It had been recently determined in a solemn conclave of Goldinghams that the moment had arrived

for converting it into a joint-stock company. The vastness of the concern, its widespread ramifications, its enormous capital, its promise of splendid dividends, would be sure to impress the public, always on the look-out for a new El Dorado. The company would be on a magnificent scale. Fortunes would be made in the process of its birth. It must be launched by a great House, which would be greater still by many hundred thousands of pounds when the operation was complete.

Whose should that great house be? To whom should the splendid, the lucrative task be confided? Into whose coffers should this golden stream descend? Judiciously manipulated, it was an affair of half a million at the least. In skilful hands who could say what it might not be capable of producing? Which of the many magnates was to have it? This was the piece of news which Mrs. Heriot conveyed to her companion's attentive ear—this the query which she suggested.

Both perfectly realised the situation and understood its bearing on their own family crisis. With the help of this, Claude de Renzi might appear before his father, not a humble suppliant, but as a high negotiating power whom it is impossible to defy and expedient to conciliate. The launching of the company was recognised in Mr. Goldingham's family circle as an opportunity of which much might be made. It would be a plum. Whoever got it would be placed under an enormous obligation.

Mr. Goldingham was not in the habit of obliging people for nothing. Such an occasion ought to mark a bold step in family aggrandisement.

Mrs. Heriot was the person who realised the position most clearly and had most qualifications for carrying out the necessary diplomacy. It had occurred to her that Claude de Renzi's engagement to her ward and kinswoman would be an emphatic de-

claration to the world that the Goldinghams stood on a splendid height of socio-financial sublimity. They would be allied with the great powers of the money world. Mr. Goldingham approved his daughter's views and lent himself readily to abet her policy. She told him of De Renzi's devotion to Olivia, and suggested that she should be armed with plenary powers for conducting the negotiation. Mr. Goldingham readily enough agreed. It required but little manipulation on Mrs. Heriot's part to invest the offer with a condition upon which Claude de Renzi might insist on his own behalf. With such an offer in his hands he might dictate his own terms.

But bounteous Fortune had further blessings in reserve. Another event about this time paved the way for Claude de Renzi in his diplomatic endeavours to win his mother to his side of the dispute.

The Duke of Egeria was one of the

greatest men in England and one of the best judges of a pretty woman. To this interesting judicial process he devoted all the resources of a historical family, a colossal income, a cultivated intellect, a fascinating person. He was a cosmopolitan Mæcenæ. His pictures, his library, his gardens were each the despair of rivals, the delight of connoisseurs, the wonder of mankind. For public life he showed a cynical contempt. Politics, which ought to be a recreation for gentlemen and a science for philosophers, had become a mere scramble for the goodwill of the mob, which, with each new dose of power, becomes more self-asserting, rapacious, and tyrannical. Each aspirant to power provides a fresh scheme of spoliation—grosser, more flagrant, more scandalous than the last. The tide is rolling in again, it will submerge us all. In the meantime the only rational thing to do is to await the deluge with equanimity, and to close the chapter

of civilisation with an ornate and luxurious page—in other words, to collect all the most admirable things that money will buy, and invite all the prettiest women in Europe to come and admire them.

When it was known that the Duke of Egeria admired and patronised, the admiration and patronage of the rest of the human race was a matter of course. Claude de Renzi was startled when Mrs. Heriot said calmly, in reply to some proposal of his own for the following Saturday, ‘No; that will not do: that is the day we go to Bellevue.’

Now Bellevue was one of the duke’s numerous abodes, a palatial villa, near enough to London to make it an easy retreat for a Sunday in the country. To be invited to Bellevue meant a great deal. It was a compliment by which the most critical were pleased, the proudest were flattered. It was the best thing of the sort in England—in the world. The milk of all civilisation had been

skimmed to produce a cream so thick, so rich, so exquisite as this.

When Mrs. Heriot received an invitation for herself, her husband, and Olivia to spend a Sunday at Bellevue, she knew what was meant. The apple of Paris had been conferred. Olivia stood on the dizzy heights of greatness, and was carrying her relations along with her in her upward flight. She was receiving homage, which stamped her in the eyes of mankind as worthy of adoration. She had become famous; she might soon become historical. The resources of civilisation were exhausted. Society had no greater bliss to give.

Mrs. Valentine made the announcement and De Renzi received it with the indifference due to an everyday occurrence.

‘I am so glad,’ De Renzi said, ‘because I have been invited there for that Sunday too. We shall be able to amuse each other. The duchess’s Sundays are sometimes a little dull.’

The following week several columns of the morning papers were occupied by the Prospectus of 'Goldingham & Company, Limited,' for which the firm of Raphael de Renzi invited subscriptions. The greatest actuaries in London had examined the books of the firm and proved, by reference to past years, the golden prospects of the undertaking. There were vast contracts on hand, which would secure splendid dividends for several years to come. Forthwith there was a rush upon the new company. The Stock Exchange caught the fever; the public went in for a gamble. Long before the letters of allotment were issued, fortunes were made and lost in 'Goldinghams.' An attempted combination to run down the project, after impeding its progress for a week, ignominiously collapsed. The battlefield was strewn with prostrate 'bears.' The shares rose daily. Sir Raphael de Renzi and Co. were triumph-

ant. They and their friends made fortunes.

Claude had a venture on his own account, and one morning brought Olivia a cheque for £1000, earned by an allotment which he had secured for her, and which, he told her, was her own, to make ducks and drakes with as she pleased. In the course of these agreeable proceedings Sir Raphael's assent to his son's alliance was announced, and Claude, one afternoon, took Olivia in triumph to tea with Lady de Renzi, to be formally introduced to her new relations.

CHAPTER XXX

IO TRIUMPHE!

‘ Medio de fonte leporum
Surgit amari aliquid.’

MRS. HERIOT had attained her grand climacteric. Her cup of bliss was full. She had been to Bellevue, had witnessed her *protégée's* apotheosis, and had established a small flirtation with the duke on her own account. In her house, under her superintendence, had been achieved one of the memorable engagements of the season. The most eligible of London bachelors was a safe capture in her drawing-room. She felt towards Olivia as the fortunate owner of a Derby winner to the precious three-year-old that has accomplished

that inestimable feat. Mrs. Heriot's horse had justified the prescient wisdom that foresaw success, had proved worthy of the training, the care, the expense, the anxiety which a triumph so sublime involves. For a triumph it was — the greatest, most difficult of all. Nothing remained but to sit at ease, enjoying a delicious sense of successful accomplishment, on glory's golden heights.

Olivia was now surrounded by all the materials of enjoyment in embarrassing profusion. She was among the flesh-pots of Egypt. Her life was full of excitements, amusements, pleasure with rose-crowned brows and a flowing cup ; hope, for what might she not now hope in the way of pleasurable existence ? Riches mean a great deal to every one ; but to a girl of twenty who has known the tight grip of poverty, its ignominious shifts and expedients, its tedium, its sordid anxieties, its dire necessities, and to whom wealth comes in the delightful guise of hom-

age to personal charm, to whom it comes in the form of a husband—brilliant, admiring, aspiring and with a good right to aspire, ambitious, with the firm, capable, daring step of the man who sees his way to glory—how should not the prospect be bewildering? What time is there in such a life to do more than strive to keep pace with it, to taste each passing pleasure as it flies, to hold one's own with the busy, eager, jostling throng around, to live up to the occasion, to enjoy it as it ought to be enjoyed?

And Olivia had real enjoyment. She was delighted with the world, credulous of its promise of joy. People abused its hollowness, its emptiness, its cruelty, its vulgarity, its disappointed hopes, its uninteresting interests, its tasteless pleasures. What did such people mean? They were the unfortunate surely, the morbid, the cynical, the ill-natured, who could take so sombre, so distorted a view of life—life that smiled at one so invitingly, so

caressingly; life so full of kindness, of flattery, homage, friendship, and—as Olivia had now the happiness to experience—of love.

The happiness of love! Was Olivia happy? She assured herself, and everybody assured her, that she was. At any rate, she was very much excited, very much interested, deeply stirred by the hopes and passions of the existence that was opening so auspiciously upon her. Admiration is delightful, and Olivia was greatly admired. Many people conspired to tell her that she was beautiful. More than one Society journal had recorded her presence at a fashionable festivity, and detailed her attire and appearance for the delight, emulation, and despair of less fortunate womankind. For Olivia's charm was inimitable. Mrs. Valentine spared no trouble or expense on her cousin's toilette; but all authorities agreed that simplicity was Olivia's most becoming *rôle*. All agreed that her beauty was of an order that needed no fine clothes,

and that Olivia, put on what she would, was sure to find it surpassingly becoming. Still De Renzi's bride-elect, the conspicuous beauty of the hour, must be appropriately dressed ; and Olivia's new dresses, as they followed each other with bewildering rapidity, gave her, it may be believed, a series of highly agreeable sensations. She figured in many splendid crowds, and the splendid crowds did not conceal their curiosity and interest. Life, that phase of life, at any rate, which Olivia was now experiencing, was, she felt, one long excitement. But excitement is fatiguing, and Olivia, despite her youth, health, fine animal spirits, and lovely dresses, often—and more often as the season went on and familiarity had dulled the edge of enjoyment—felt dreadfully fatigued. Sometimes, moreover, when she was, perforce, for a short moment at rest, unwelcome visitors would come and knock at her heart's door, and peremptorily claim admission—visitors whom Olivia would

fain have ignored. Regret would come, and vague unrest, a sense of dissatisfaction, an undefinable melancholy. Fear came oftenest of all, and knocked the loudest. Of what was she afraid? She knew not, nor why. But she knew that it was so; and fear is none the less fearful because it defies analysis.

Could it be that Olivia was, at heart, dissatisfied with her lover's wooing, and depressed by it? Claude made many protests of admiration, and wearied her by unceasing eulogies of her charms, by prophecies of the social triumphs which awaited her, the impression which her entrance into the world as a bride would create, the paling of inferior luminaries before the excelling star of brightness. 'You meaner beauties of the night,' he would cry,

“That poorly satisfy our eyes
More by your number than your light,
You common people of the skies,
What are you when the moon shall rise?”

‘I don’t care about being the moon, thank you,’ Olivia said, with a tinge of irritation in her tone, which gave it a serious meaning. ‘To begin with, it is a satellite, and I hate satellites ; and then it is uninteresting, cold, dead, all its volcanoes gone out ; nothing but a big ash-heap—I was reading somewhere—lit up on some nights of the month with borrowed brightness for our express edification.’

‘*Your* volcanoes have not gone out at any rate, have they?’ her future husband said, taking a mental admiring note of the latent rebellion in the fiery young creature whom he was hereafter to dominate. ‘You must forgive a few rhapsodies till our marriage-day, at any rate. You do not know how intensely I admire you.’

Olivia repented at once. ‘I am ungrateful,’ she said. ‘Forgive me ; you make too much of me, Claude—a thousand times too much. I am no better than a hundred others, and not half so good as many. If you are

content with me, I am content with myself and my lot; only love me, love me. You will always love me, will you not?’

What meant those appeals to so ardent a protester of devotion? Why did Olivia, after a flood of homage, still feel that she needed something more from her lover—some further expression of love, some tender touch, some look of devotion, some little sign which makes the loving heart rejoice?

The fact is, that some men, who are clever enough to do almost anything, and who are believed by the world—themselves included—to be adepts at making love, know not the sacred secrets of that mysterious art. Olivia, at the end of all Claude’s protestations, was still haunted by a doubt as to whether her future husband was not laughing at her, at himself, and the romantic relationship which exposed them for a time to the gaze of society in a serio-comic light. It was impossible for a man whose head was so busy

with other things to surrender himself to a single dominating passion. De Renzi cared intensely for politics, or, rather, for the success of his party and himself in the political combat. To this he gave all the seriousness of his nature, its gravest thought, its keenest endeavour. His heart was in it ; his blood was up ; he was resolved to win. It was the great victory of life ; it must be achieved at all hazards ; to this end all other ends must be subordinate, every other interest, pleasure, sentiment, must give way. This was his real *grande passion*. It left but scanty room for any other. He had not the leisure for a protracted love-making ; nor, had there been leisure, would De Renzi's temperament have inclined him to protract it. Say what he might of his passion, he could not pretend to be absorbed, dominated by it. He was intent on the game of life, and it was hard to snatch a thought for any other subject.

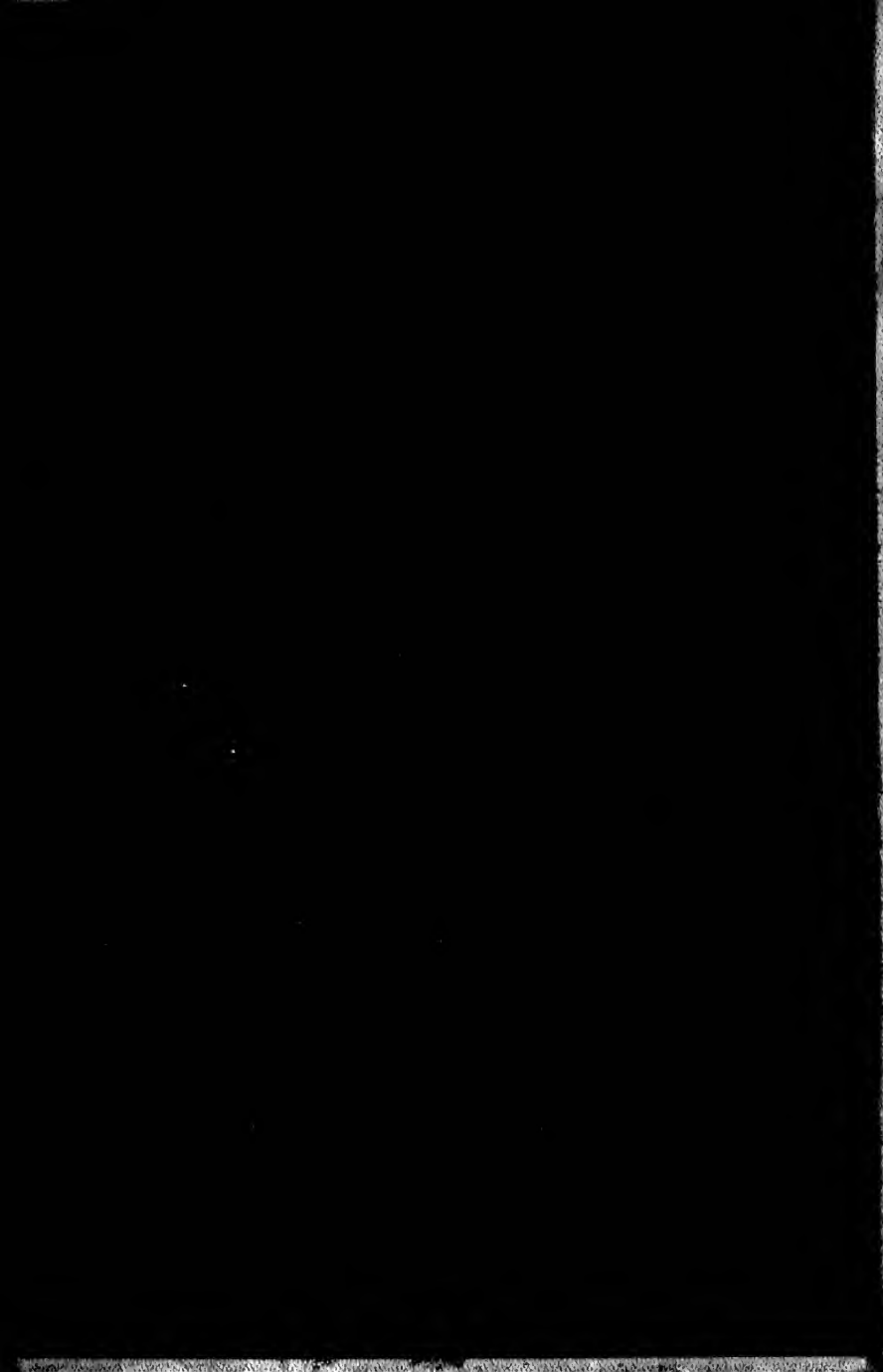
Olivia's opportunities for confidential intercourse with her lover were not abundant. They met constantly ; but it was, for the most part, in public ; or, at any rate, not in the privacy and quiet congenial to the lover's mood. Mrs. Heriot's house did not lend itself to privacy or to quiet of any sort. She herself treated love-making, when once its practical object was achieved, with the scanty respect due to an obsolete accomplishment. It was an embarrassing necessity, she explained, if Olivia hinted dissatisfaction at her lover's scanty leisure and reticent moods. The unsophisticated classes—the Strephons and Chloes of country life—do it with unblushing frankness. But among ladies and gentlemen the period which two mortals devote to mutual adoration exposes them, more or less, to satirical and amused observation. A man must get through it as best he may, making himself as little ridiculous as possible. The future bride is pleasantly

enough situated ; she poses as the coy recipient of a thousand flatteries from her future husband and from society at large ; she sails in a summer sea and bears her blushing honours thick upon her. But the prospective bridegroom becomes, for the time, a social cypher : he is lost to society ; he is of no use for anything but the private idyll of domestic romance. He cannot amuse, he dare not flirt ; it would be profane to dance. He is like the victim of some childish malady, which excites no pity and may provoke contempt. The sooner it is over the better, on every account. Meanwhile prudence and self-respect, and a wholesome dread of ridicule from heartless observers, prompt rigorous concealment. To betray sentiment would be ridiculous, and to be ridiculous is the terror even of the courageous. The sensible lover endeavours by a judicious reserve to give ridicule as little scope as possible.

Olivia could not controvert her cousin's

doctrines ; at any rate, did not attempt to do so. Nevertheless the result was not exhilarating. Sentiment is a bird that loves freedom ; loves to air itself in the summer light, to sing its heart-felt strain at ease, regardless of the world below. What mattered it, Olivia asked herself, what people thought or said, and whether the ill-natured ones thought fit to be amused ? Why was Claude so nervously sensitive to the ridicule of the outer world ? What was this society, whose influence forced its way between her lover and herself, chilling the natural outflow of affection with the menace of a sneer ? Thus Olivia began to find her time of love-making not so bright, joyous, and unrestrained as in her girlish fancies she had dreamt that it must be.

END OF VOL. II



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